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UNCLE SAM'S DETECTIVE IN CHICAGO.

BY GEORGE C. JENKS.



DETECTIVE RALPH HAD HARDLY TIME TO NOTE THE EFFECT OF THE BLOW WHEN SMASHER JIM HAD HIM BY THE THROAT.

Uncle Sam's Detective in Chicago;

OR,

THE COUNTRY POSTMASTER AMONG BUNCO-MEN.

A Story of the Underground Counterfeiters' Den.

BY GEORGE C. JENKS,

AUTHOR OF "GIT THAR OWNEY," "DOUBLE-CURVE DAN," "IRON HAND," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE WAR-PATH.

INSPECTOR JOHN GRIPP sat in his private office in one of the great Government buildings in Washington. He was one of the most trusted and influential officials in the Secret Service, and he had earned the confidence reposed in him by the heads of his Department by more than one clever job, that had resulted in placing slippery rascals in the Penitentiary.

He touched a hand-bell on his big, official-looking table, and abstractedly glanced at the dirty windows that looked upon a blank wall at a dozen yards' distance, as if he were trying to read the result of the mission upon which he was about to send a man to Chicago.

"Send Ralph Rapier to me," said the inspector, in the quick, stern tones of a man accustomed to command, without looking at the colored messenger who answered the ring.

"Yes, sah."

"Ready Ralph. Always on deck," mused the inspector, as he arose from his seat and mechanically traced the name on the dirty window panes with his forefinger. "Yes. He is only a boy, but at the same time he is the only one on my force that I could trust with this job. Well, well. What matters the age, so long as the ability is there?"

"Inspector, I'm on deck!" were the words, in low, but decisive tones, that disturbed his reverie, and caused him to rub out the words on the window with the palm of his hand in some confusion.

"Oh, you are here, eh? You leave for Chicago on the 7:20 train to-night," said the inspector, carelessly, as he looked scrutinizingly at the young fellow who stood before him.

Ralph Rapier was an ordinary-looking young fellow of perhaps twenty years of age, with an innocent face that would deceive the sharpest observer, unless he took particular note of the keen gray eyes that had the faculty of seeing everything at one sweeping glance. He was not tall, but the stout frame suggested considerable strength, and one could fancy that it would require the exercise of a great deal of force to knock the lad off those firmly-planted, sturdy legs. His face wore a healthy glow, that deepened into a tan on his cheeks and chin, and most persons who saw Ready Ralph Rapier would say that he was a sailor, judging him by his complexion alone, without taking into account the peculiar roll in his gait that is characteristic of the Jack tar.

Ralph Rapier had acquired his sobriquet of "Ready" from the simple fact that he could never be taken by surprise, but was always ready for whatever might turn up, whether in the way of work or frolic; his favorite expression, "I'm on deck," being warranted by the promptitude with which he always came forward at the right time.

It was little wonder that he was regarded by John Gripp as the most valuable man on his staff for the delicate detective work that falls to the Secret Service officers in so many cases.

John Gripp did not waste time in giving his orders, and in five minutes Ready Ralph understood that he was to find out the man

who was producing a very dangerous ten-dollar counterfeit greenback that had been put out rather extensively in the World's Fair grounds, and Chicago generally, and, having discovered the plant, to arrest the man and his confederates.

"That all, inspector?" said Ralph, quietly, when John Gripp ceased talking as he made one or two entries in a small note-book, with as much unconcern as if he were being sent to the next street to purchase a loaf of bread, instead of taking upon himself a task that would have seemed hopeless to any but a trained detective, with an unlimited supply of nerve.

"You will need money. Here are two hundred and fifty dollars. If it is not enough, the Department will send you more, of course."

The lad took the roll of bills handed to him by the inspector, and placed them safely in a small leather pouch, under his shirt, that hung from his neck by a cord, and observed, carelessly, as he turned toward the door:

"Any clue?"

"No."

"Suspect anybody?"

The inspector knitted his black brows in thought, ere he answered:

"Smasher Jim's term at the Columbus Penitentiary expired three months ago. He has not been heard of since."

"Thanks," said Ready.

"You needn't thank me. I don't say he is in this thing, although the Department has pretty good information that the job is being operated by one man, and I don't know any one but Smasher who could turn out such good work. The plates are near enough to deceive any ordinary person."

"What is Smasher's full name?" asked Ralph, with his note-book in his hand.

"Entered at Columbus as James Wilkins," answered Gripp, shortly. "His name may be anything."

"Good-night, inspector."

Detective Ralph was at the door, with his note-book in his pocket, and he nodded cheerfully to his superior as he passed out and made his way through several corridors to the street.

John Gripp sat looking at the door that the boy had closed after him, as he muttered:

"If it is Smasher Jim, as I believe, Ralph Rapier will have plenty of opportunity to display his nerve, as well as his readiness, before he gets through, or I'm mistaken. Well, that is what he is paid for."

With this philosophical reflection, John Gripp closed his desk, and strolled peacefully to his home in the suburbs, where he spent all his time when not on duty, for he was a domestic man, and liked to be with his family, where he could play with the children, and suffer an occasional scolding from his wife with a mildness that would have surprised some of those who only knew him as the stern man of iron who was such a terror to offenders against the Government. But Americans like John Gripp are to be found everywhere, if we only knew it.

Detective Ralph lived with his mother, and was her only support. She had unbounded confidence in her son, and when he took his seat in the Pullman sleeping car at seven o'clock, and waited for it to pull out of the station, he was not distracted by any fears that his mother was worrying about him.

With the ease of an experienced traveler, he hung his stiff hat on the brass hook over his head and put on a soft cap, with the visor pulled well over his brows. Then he took out a Chicago paper that he had purchased immediately on leaving the inspector, and read with close attention for the third or fourth time an account of the way in which the spurious ten-dollar bills were being put around in Chicago, and how the

banks had discovered them, and had set the police to work to try and find out the counterfeiters, as well as those who were passing the notes—or, in the language of the police and crooks, "shoving the queer."

"Not much to be got out of that," muttered the detective, as he glanced quickly over his fellow-passengers in the car, "but, from all that I can read, I guess the old man is right about the work being done by one man. And a slick operator he is, too, as I can see already. Smasher Jim, eh? Here is his description."

He took from his pocket a sheet of paper with the heading of the Police Department of Washington and read it carefully.

"Ah, I think I should know that man anywhere. Those fellows at the Columbus Penitentiary know how to put down the points of a man's face and physique, as well as to measure his fingers, his thumb, his ears, his nose, and the rest of it, by what they call the 'Bertillon system.'"

He returned the paper to his pocket, and was looking carelessly about the car, when he gave a start that he could not repress, although, as a rule, he kept his feelings well under control.

"Smasher Jim, or I'm a lubber!" was his muttered exclamation.

The train started just as a rather rough-looking man stepped into the car, squeezing himself around through the narrow space between the smoking-room and the side of the car, and then dropping into the first seat, with his back to Ready Ralph.

The young Headquarters detective had had but a momentary glimpse of the face of the new-comer, but was as certain that it was that of the man suspected of the wholesale counterfeiting at Chicago as he was that the stranger was evidently trying to avoid observation as much as possible, without appearing to do so.

Ralph's brain was hard at work, and he was trying to make up his mind what to do under the circumstances. It did not take him long to resolve that his only course was to keep quiet, and be watchful for the present, and to keep his eyes on Smasher Jim.

The man in the end seat sat still until the porter asked him whether he was ready to have his berth made up. Then he nodded and went into the smoking-room.

Ralph waited a minute or two, and then strolled carelessly into the little corner reserved for smokers, himself.

His man was sitting in a corner, with a cigar between his lips, which he was puffing vigorously, while he kept his gaze fixed out of the window. It was still daylight, although it would soon become dusk, and there was plenty of excuse for a traveler watching the scenery, and taking no notice of his fellow-passengers.

"I must get another look at his face," decided the detective. "I am sure it is he, but I want to see him again, anyhow. The longer I study his ugly countenance, the more certain I am to know him again. I don't see why the Washington police did not get his photograph from the Penitentiary people, while they were about it. If this should not prove to be the Smasher, I will write to them for it myself."

Ralph took a cigar from his pocket, bit off the end, and, leaning toward his companion, asked him:

"Will you oblige me with a light?"

Without answering or turning his head, the other took the box of safety matches always provided by the Pullman company from the little bracket between the windows and handed it to the detective.

"Thanks!" said Ralph, politely, as he lighted his cigar, adding mentally: "That settles it. He is Smasher Jim. He does not want me to look at him."

The detective smoked slowly, and besides, seemed to have a great deal of trouble with

his cigar, for he reached over for the match-box at least half a dozen times, so that he could get nearer to the sulky passenger in the corner, but always without being able to get a view of his face.

"Your berth is ready, sah," announced the porter, at last, as he poked his head around the corner and looked at the man Ralph supposed to be Smasher Jim.

Without answering, the traveler arose, covering his face with a large red handkerchief as he did so, as if he were wiping his nose, but really, as the detective felt sure, to prevent his features being seen.

"What a fool he must be to act in that way," was the detective's mental comment, as the other disappeared into the body of the car. "He might know that he is only giving himself away, for he evidently suspects me of being after him. Well, I haven't got him yet, but I will have him, before he is much older."

Ralph went into the car, where his berth was ready, and as he passed "Lower 1," he noticed that the occupant had gone inside and pulled the curtains close, and stopping slightly, to look under the bed, he saw that Smasher Jim (if he it was,) had not put his shoes there to be cleaned.

"Lying down with all his clothes and his shoes on, eh?" muttered the detective. "That is suspicious in itself. I do not suppose I shall get much sleep to-night. I must keep my eye on that berth, or he will slip through my fingers yet."

The detective slipped off his shoes and tumbled into his berth, for an hour or two of rest.

"There are no stops for four hours, and he would not be likely to get off in this part of the country, anyhow, particularly as I know he has a ticket for Chicago," thought Ralph, "so I may as well get some sleep, while I can."

The detective, young though he was, had been through many experiences more or less like the present, and seemed to possess the faculty of intuitively knowing when it was necessary to be on the alert, even when asleep. This faculty it was that made Ready Ralph leap from his berth, from a sound sleep, and slip on his shoes, while he looked down the aisle toward "Lower 1."

As he expected, the curtains were pulled aside, and when he reached the berth he saw that it was empty!

The train was running slowly, and he understood at once that it had stopped, for some reason, and that it was just starting again.

"He sha'n't get away, if I have to follow him to the Cannibal Islands," muttered Ralph, as he rushed through the smoking-room, and then to the door.

It was very dark, and that intense stillness that pervades all nature in the early morning told the young detective that it was between two and three o'clock.

He was convinced that his man was not on the train, and the proper course for the young detective, obviously, was to get off and try to follow Smasher Jim. Without hesitation Ralph leaped from the steps of the car into the darkness. He had had experience in jumping from moving trains, and he knew that if he threw himself well back, and jumped with the train, he would not be likely to hurt himself.

He alighted on his feet on a swampy spot, but staggered and nearly fell from the shock. As he swung his arms wildly, to recover his balance, he involuntarily embraced the form of a man who was standing in the darkness, and whom he had not seen.

"What the deuce—" began the detective, when, at that moment, the moon peeped from behind some clouds, and he finished his sentence: "Smasher Jim, by all that's lucky!"

"Lucky, is it, you whelp?" growled the Smasher. "We'll see!"

The detective saw a bowie-knife gleaming in the rays of the moon, and he had only just time to knock aside the arm of the powerful fellow who wielded the weapon, to prevent its being buried in his breast.

Ere Ralph could recover himself or use the revolver he had promptly drawn from his hip-pocket, the moon disappeared again for an instant, and when it shone forth once more, Smasher Jim was gone.

CHAPTER II.

A KNOCK-OUT FOR READY RALPH.

It was several hours after the occurrences related in the last chapter. The scene was a country grocery and post-office combined, at Sangville, Indiana—a place where only two or three trains a day were in the habit of stopping, although it was on the main line, and where the inhabitants were content to get what news of the outside world they wanted from the Chicago Sunday papers and their own weekly sheet, that came out every week when the editor could get it out, and appeared at any odd time, when he couldn't.

The keeper of the grocery was Hiram Hawkins, postmaster, a typical country Hoosier, who could talk ancient politics by the yard, but who had a very hazy idea of current events outside of Sangville. He was a big man, with a bushy beard, which he was fond of caressing as he discussed the affairs of his neighbors, and that gave him a patriarchal appearance of which he was very proud.

"So, Jim, ye want me to go tew Chicago, dew ye?" he was saying, as he sat on the counter, and stared straight into the face of a man with whom the reader is already acquainted.

"Yes, and I want you to go to-day, at noon."

"Cracky! That's almighty sudden."

"Will you do it?" asked Smasher Jim, impatiently. "I told you there was a lot of money in it for you, and I mean what I said."

"Wal, I dunno. Ye see, I'm postmaster here, an' there mought be two or three letters come for some of the folks, an' I don't know whether Lucy could handle all that there Government bizness."

"Yes, I could, father," broke in a pretty young girl behind the counter, who was evidently the Lucy referred to. "The Government business isn't very heavy in Sangville, and if there are any letters I can let the folks know. And I can send away the mail, too, if we have any."

"Wal, I dunno what to say," observed Hiram, stroking his beard.

"You want to say something mighty quick, or I won't give you the chance," growled Smasher. "I got off the train here last night on purpose to see you, because I wanted to give you the opportunity of making money. But, if you don't want it, why, I can find some one else in Chicago, easily enough. Then, I guess you never will see the World's Fair."

"Ah! I want to see that. I've heard tell that it's a grand thing—better than a circus," remarked Hiram, sagely. Then he added, still doubtful: "But who is to get out the paper?"

"What paper?"

"The Sangville Herald. Didn't ye know I bought it three months ago, and have been editing it ever since? I tell yew, it's a great paper. It gives all the news of Sangville, Winter's Corners, Smallton's Court-house, Piketown, Seedville, Stony Creek, Turtle-back, with telegraphic dispatches from Chicago, New York, an' a lot of other p'int. I'm making a lively paper of it, an' half the town wants tew lick me, only they dasn't."

"I kin edit the paper, boss," piped a small voice from a corner of the store, where Smasher Jim now perceived a lad of about sixteen, who had been busy fishing pickled

cucumbers out of a jar, without troubling himself much about the conversation till now. "I kin handle the scissors, an' take the items w'ot come in, an' me an' Bob Jones kin set 'em up, an' then work off the forms on the hand-press afterward. I has ter do most of it every time the paper comes out, anyhow."

"Of course he can edit the paper," put in the Smasher who evidently wished the postmaster to go to Chicago, although he pretended he did not care. What he wanted the Sangville sage to do will appear as this narrative develops.

"I can help him, father," suggested Lucy.

"Yes, I can trust yew, I guess."

"Then you will go, eh?" asked Smasher Jim, hastily.

"Yes."

"Then, here is fifty dollars in advance," and the Smasher handed five new ten-dollar bills to Hiram.

The postmaster placed the money in a pocketbook, that he kept somewhere in a secret corner of his clothes, and grinned in a satisfied way, as he stroked his beard and waited for Jim to say something else.

But the Smasher did not say anything except that he wanted some breakfast, and Lucy was just going into the parlor behind the store to see about it, when the door of the store burst open, and in walked—Ready Ralph, the detective!

The Smasher uttered an oath, that he tried to turn off into a cough, as Ralph, with a careless glance in his direction, stepped to the counter, and asked Lucy for a postage-stamp.

The appearance of the young man, so calm and cool, seemed to make Smasher Jim boil with suppressed passion. He kept his eyes fixed on the young man, and his hands twitched, as if he longed to catch him by the throat and strangle him off-hand.

Ralph did not lose a movement of Smasher Jim's, although he appeared to be occupied entirely with the young girl behind the counter, from whom he had obtained a sheet of paper and envelope, and was now writing a letter with a fountain-pen that he took from his pocket. It was only a short note, some two or three lines, but it evidently possessed a deep fascination for the Smasher, who would have given a good deal to read those few lines.

"That's a queer contraption," remarked Hiram, who had admired the way in which Ralph had been able to write with a pen apparently without ink. "I'd like to look at that there."

"Certainly," said the detective. "Watch! You see, I will write the address on this envelope, without taking any more ink than is in the pen. Here it is: Inspector John Gripp, Secret Service Department, Washington, D. C."

Smasher Jim started, and took one swift step toward the young man. Ralph, who had been expecting it, turned and faced him, with a peculiar, keen look, as he repeated, slowly, as if reading from the envelope:

"Inspector John Gripp, Secret Service Bureau, Washington, D. C."

Then he handed the letter to the girl, with the query:

"When does the mail go East?"

The girl looked at the clock, and answered: "In about ten minutes. It is a quarter past nine now, and the train is due at nine-twenty-five. I must get my mail-bag ready."

There were only three other letters besides that of the detective, so that it was not a very arduous task to prepare the outgoing mail of Sangville that morning. The girl took the four letters and read each address carefully, her father looking on approvingly, as he stroked his beard and chewed a sliver from a flour barrel. He had a great idea of the importance of his share in Uncle Sam's business. Lucy laid the four letters

on the counter while she turned to find the mail-bag.

The detective was looking out of the window, and the boy, Sam Stokes, had returned to his pickle jar for one more cucumber.

Here was Smasher Jim's chance for what he had made up his mind to do. He stepped swiftly but silently to the counter, and, with a delicate manipulation rather suggestive of a pickpocket, drew Ready Ralph's letter from the other three and slipped it into his pocket.

The detective smiled knowingly. He had seen the action, but he did not intend to let Smasher Jim know it yet. He was on the alert for any treacherous movement on the part of the other, however, for he knew that the only thing Jim was waiting for was an opportunity to put him out of the way, and perhaps murder him. Since the detective had been in the store, Smasher had not made any sign of recognition, although he knew that Ralph had seen his face plainly enough when he jumped off the train, and when the bowie-knife had nearly ended the career of the young shadower.

"What is he going to do, I wonder? Read my letter, of course. Well, it was written with the idea that he might do something of the kind, so it will not do any harm. At the same time, I do not intend to let his impudence go unpunished."

Ralph was a good-natured young fellow, but there was a streak of determination in his character that boded no particular good to the Smasher in the present juncture.

Smasher looked about to see where he could go to read the letter. The door leading to the outside was immediately behind the detective, so that he could not reach that without pushing Ralph aside. He must read the note in the room, where he was.

He turned his back to the detective, while Ralph fastened his gaze upon him, with a dangerous smile playing about his lips. As Smasher tore open the envelope and opened the letter, the detective silently stole up behind him, and prepared himself for a struggle, although he did it all in such a natural and careless way that Hiram Hawkins, who had followed his movements lazily, had no idea of the fierce resolution that burned in the bosom of the innocent-looking, boyish detective.

Smasher Jim deftly unfolded the letter without noise, and in a moment had possessed himself of its contents:

"Enjoying myself very much. Expect to reach Chicago in the morning, and be looking at the World's Fair in the afternoon.
Yours, WILLIAM SMITH."

Jim was rather nonplused by this letter. He had expected something entirely different, and most likely of considerable significance to himself. But, on the contrary here was a note such as any man might send a friend while away on a pleasure trip. What could it mean?

The Smasher was not easily fooled, and a very few moments' consideration convinced him that there was a double meaning to the letter, only to be understood by one possessing the key.

"Curse him! I feel sure he is that infernal young Ralph Rapier, who brags that he is 'always on deck,'" muttered the Smasher, inaudibly, as he stood with his face to the wall and his back to the detective, with the open letter in his hand. For the moment he had forgotten where he was, and that the people in the store might be watching him, so deeply concerned was he in this mysterious letter, that he was sure signified so much more than appeared at first glance.

Ralph was looking at him with an amused expression on his face, for he comprehended pretty nearly what was passing in the mind of Smasher Jim, the counterfeiter.

"Thought that letter would puzzle him! Things are going along splendidly. I have him well in hand, and when I get a clue to his gang who are 'shoving' the stuff, I shall be able to report to Gripp that everything is all right. If I am not very much mistaken, our hayseed friend here, with the beard, is concerned in the job in some way."

From this it will be seen that Detective Ralph was accustomed to making good use of his eyes, and to putting this and that together with tolerable accuracy.

Smasher Jim was in the act of returning the letter to its envelope, intending to seal it again so that it would pass muster through the Post-office Department, when Ralph touched him on the shoulder, with the polite observation:

"I beg your pardon, sir. When you have done with my letter, I should like to hand it to the young lady behind the counter, so that she can put it in the mail-bag."

"I have lost a letter, father!" exclaimed Lucy, at this moment, in a tone of alarm.

"What's that? Dew yew mean to say that the official bizness has gone wrong already? How kin I trust yew with the United States Mail?" shrieked the postmaster, as he spit out the sliver from the flour barrel, and began to toss things about on the counter.

"Don't disturb yourself, Mr. Hawkins. This gentleman has the letter. He has just finished it," said the detective, with a smile that was very much more dangerous than a scowl.

"You lie!" howled Smasher Jim, as he slipped the letter into a pocket of his short jacket, and turned upon Ralph.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the left fist of the young detective shot out and landed on the chin of Smasher with a force that made all his teeth rattle and jarred him so that he was confused for a second.

But, the desperate man who took all chances in the pursuit of his lawless avocation was not to be knocked out by one blow on the chin from a mere boy, and the detective knew that his work was cut out for him now.

Detective Ralph had hardly time to note the effect of the blow he had bestowed when Smasher Jim had him by the throat and was shaking him as a bull-dog might a kitten. The boy was helpless in the strong grasp of his burly antagonist, and, although he seized the arms of the Smasher, and exerted all his by no means slight strength to make him release his hold, he realized that he could do nothing, but that he was utterly at the mercy of a man who showed in his face that he did not know the meaning of the word.

"You snipe! You'll tell me that I read your cursed letter. Durn me! I'll choke the gizzard out of you!" sputtered Smasher, as he tightened his hold on the boy's throat and shook him a little harder.

The other occupants of the store had been so taken by surprise by the sudden onslaught on the young man that they had remained perfectly still at first, as if petrified.

But Hiram Hawkins believed in fair play, and his first thought, when he recovered himself, was that it was hardly right for a burly fellow like James Walker (by which name he knew "Smasher Jim") to be choking the life out of a mere boy while others looked on. Besides, Hiram Hawkins loved fighting for its own sake, and he would just as soon have a scrap with his nearest and dearest friend as with his most vindictive enemy, and he did not yet regard James Walker as his nearest and dearest friend, by any means.

"Blame my cats! Give the boy a show, will ye?" he howled, as he sprung into the fray and pushed back the Smasher with a force that made him move back a step, although he did not release his hold of the detective. "This racket don't go in

Indianny, ef it does in Chicago. Yew hear me!"

"Sail in, boss! Gosh! I ain't seen so much fun since my brother had the measles!" exclaimed Sam Stokes, who was dancing about in an excess of enjoyment, while Lucy, behind the counter, watched the encounter in the fear and trembling natural to her sex.

"Go away from me!" growled Smasher Jim to the postmaster, "or you'll get hurt, too!"

"I will, eh? An' who's tew hurt me, I'd like to know?" rejoined Hiram, as he exerted all his force to make the man release his hold of Ralph.

Smasher Jim did not reply, but there was murder in his eyes, as he threw all his strength into one supreme effort, and hurled the lad across the store, where he fell in an insensible heap—dead, to all appearances.

CHAPTER III.

MOTHER HALKET AND HER MYSTERIOUS MISSION.

It was night in Chicago. The electric lights were glowing in a sea of white radiance in the Electrical Building and other parts of the Columbian Exposition in Jackson Park, and the main thoroughfares of the great city were all bright with the same wonderful modern illumination. Most of the stores were closed, but the saloons, restaurants, cigar stores and similar places were all doing business, while the theaters showed, by their bright lobbies and vestibules, that the performance was still in progress within.

State street, Madison street, Clark street, and the other big thoroughfares where the Chicago resident and the Chicago visitor most delight to congregate, both day and night, were not the only streets where the busy hum of people could be heard as the big clocks in church steeples and public buildings tolled forth the hour of ten.

On the West Side, among the network of streets in which the cheaper kind of retail stores and the big factories where all sorts of things, from steel bridges to chocolate caramels, are made, were throngs of men, women and children, who found more amusement in the streets, even at that hour, than in their own small houses or rooms.

In spite of the vigilance of the police, there were plenty of "crooks" among those who walked along the lighted business streets, or turned corners into those quieter avenues where dark factories loomed up threateningly, and where rows of houses for boarders or lodgers carried advertisements of their uses in the crowds of people who sat on their steps or stood in knots on the sidewalks in desultory conversation.

A stout, surly-looking fellow, in a short jacket and a cap pulled well over his brows, walked swiftly along one of these side streets, looking neither to the right or left, but pushing straight ahead, like one who knew just where he was going, and was anxious to get there as soon as possible.

Some dozen yards behind him slouched an awkward, middle-aged man, with a heavy beard concealing his chin, which he stroked mechanically as he moved along, with his eyes on the figure of the man ahead of him. The awkward man was dressed in clothes of countrified cut, and to a Chicagoan "hayseed" was written in every wrinkle of his old-fashioned coat, and every hair of his untrimmed beard.

Is it necessary to say that the first man was Smasher Jim, and the second Hiram Hawkins postmaster, of Sangville, Indiana?

Suddenly, Smasher Jim stopped in front of a modest, one-story frame house, that stood a little back from the sidewalk, and had a yard in front, with a fence to prevent people getting close enough to look into the parlor window, even if there had not been thick white curtains closely drawn all day, and

heavy wooden shutters fastened outside at night.

The shutters were up now, and for anything that could be discerned from the street, there might not have been a living creature in the house.

The Smasher entered the little yard and pressed the button of an electric bell, looking up the street and beckoning Hiram Hawkins while waiting for someone to come to the door.

"Wal, this dew beat creation," exclaimed Hiram, as he reached the gate and looked at Jim.

"What?" asked that worthy, gruffly.

"Why, this here dodging about the city, without any reason. Ef that's the way they dew in Chicago, I don't see how they find time tew git through all the work they dew."

"Don't talk so much," growled the Smasher. "All the owners of the big factories and stores you've seen since you've been in town made their money by keeping their mouths shut."

"Wal, I couldn't never acquire no wealth that way," declared Hiram, with a little sigh.

"Well, shut up now, anyhow," admonished Smasher, as the door of the house opened.

The person who opened the front door was a sweet-faced, white-haired old lady, with a fresh complexion and bright eyes dancing behind the glasses of her gold spectacles. She wore a neat black dress, set off with a white lace bertha crossed over her shoulders while a white apron added to her neat, wholesome appearance.

She smiled lightly as Smasher Jim pushed past her into the hall, and then said, in a voice as pleasing as her appearance:

"Come in, Mr. Hawkins! We have been expecting you."

"Blame me," exclaimed the postmaster, as he pulled at his beard with more force than he ever used save when he was much surprised. "How do you know my name?"

"Oh, you are quite famous in Chicago," responded the old lady. "Everybody knows the great Government official at the thriving town of Sangville. Besides, a number of copies of the Sangville *Herald* come to Chicago regularly."

Hiram turned a sort of reddish blue, which was the nearest approach to a blush he ever reached, as he listened to this implied compliment, and came forward to enter the house, when Smasher Jim, who had been into the back room, put his head out of doorway, and said gruffly:

"Quit that gammon, Mother Halket, and bring the jay in here."

"What's that? Where's the feller as dares ter call me a jay? I'll grind him to salt," howled Hiram, up in arms in a moment at the contemptuous expression.

But, to his unmittigated surprise, the sweet old lady seized him by the arm, and gave him a pull of such violence that he was drawn into the hall, half-way down, in an exceedingly flustered condition, while the front door was shut with a bang, and he found himself the central figure in a crowd of grinning men, the sweet old lady who had so unexpectedly revealed the possession of almost herculean strength, standing, smoothing her bertha, and looking at him with a benevolent smile that would have done credit to any saint in the calendar.

"That was right, Mother Halket!" laughed a tall, sandy mustached fellow, with weak eyes, as he caught hold of the old lady, and shook her hand, with great heartiness. "Be me sowl, ye'll be makin' us all ashamed of ourselves fer the wakeness of our arms in toime."

"Keep quiet, Rufe. When I want your commendation, I will ask for it," was the not very gracious response of the dear old

lady, who, it seems, answered to the name of Mother Halket. "I couldn't stand there waiting for the gentleman all night, so I had to bring him in."

Hiram Hawkins often boasted that nothing could surprise him, but he was in a state of bewildered astonishment as he looked at Mother Halket, smoothing her bertha, and from her to the crowd of tough-looking men enjoying his discomfiture.

Smasher Jim led the way into the back room, where several packs of cards and a strong smell of tobacco, to say nothing of a large tin bucket of beer on the floor, and a lot of glasses, indicated that the gentlemen had been enjoying themselves in their own way.

"What did you do with that fellow you wired me about?" asked Mother Halket, beaming benevolently upon him through her gold spectacles.

"Ready Ralph, as they call him, eh?" responded Smasher. "Oh, I fixed him. He tried to bunco my friend Hiram Hawkins, and I pretty nearly choked him to death, and—"

"By gosh! You did that," interrupted the postmaster. "I—"

But here the sweet old lady took Hiram by the arm with a grip of iron and swung him against the wall with considerable force.

"It's one of the rules of this association that no one is to interrupt the governor when he is talking," she remarked, kindly, as Hiram rubbed his arm where she had squeezed it with her fingers, and looked at her as if he thought she was a very Jezebel.

Mother Halket understood perfectly well what was passing in his mind, and she enjoyed it. One of the worst women in Chicago, who was known by the police to be a receiver of stolen property, and was more than suspected of being associated with the gang of counterfeiters that was causing so much trouble now, nothing could ever be proved against her. She professed to keep a workingman's boarding-house, and as she never allowed any noise or disturbance to take place in her house, there was no excuse for the police to raid it and institute the thorough search they would have liked.

Had they got into the house they would not have been likely to find anything that would criminate her, for Hiram Hawkins saw that it was furnished in the meager style peculiar to such city boarding-houses as he had seen, and the men, while rough, were not making any more noise than would be heard in any boarding-house where the men were not of a refined character.

At one time, when the police thought they had a pretty good case against Mother Halket for receiving stolen property, they arrested her. But her sweet, innocent appearance completely disarmed the jury, if not the court itself, and she left triumphant, with a verdict of "Not guilty," after the most positive testimony on the part of the police and their witnesses that she had received and disposed of a large part of the booty from an extensive jewelry robbery on State street.

Such was Mother Halket, and the reader will easily suppose that Hiram Hawkins would be likely to need all the wisdom he boasted of to see him safely through his present adventure.

"What became of Ready Ralph?" asked Mother Halket.

"I was going to say, he had the cheek to complain about something I was doing, and when I had my hands on him, so that I could have settled him forever, this jay here interfered."

The postmaster was about to enter another objection against being called a jay, but an almost imperceptible movement on the part of Mother Halket made him change his mind and keep quiet. He had a wholesome respect for her remarkable strength.

"Be jabers! Phwy didn't ye choke him,

too, Smasher?" demanded Rufe Rourke, the sandy-mustached man.

"I showed the jay that the fellow had beaten him, or was trying to beat him, out of a dollar, by giving him a counterfeit, and then he took a different view of the case, and helped me take him into the woods, and tie him to a tree, where he would be likely to remain until somebody found him. That's the way we fixed Ralph Rapier."

"Yes, he would have to stay there till about six o'clock in the evening, I suppose, till the men working in the brickyard at Stony Creek went home through the woods that way. They would untie him, of course."

"Of course," assented the Smasher.

Hiram stared harder than ever at the benevolent old lady as she talked so familiarly about places in the neighborhood of Sangville, and his suspicion that she was diabolically connected was much strengthened.

"So he couldn't leave for Chicago till tomorrow morning, because there was no other train to-day after three fifty-four," added Mother Halket.

"That's right. But never mind about that kid. How's the lay going on here?" asked Smasher.

"Good. We are putting out the beauties in good shape. Some of the boys here are doing it in connection with their other jobs. But we are running out of stuff."

"All right. We'll make some more to-night, and begin now."

The other two men had all resumed their occupations of card-playing and smoking in the back room, and only the three—Hiram, Smasher and Mother Halket—were left in the hall.

"Shall I open?" asked Mother Halket, briefly, as she closed the door of the back room.

"Yes. He's got to know, and I'll make such arrangements with him that he will never give us away," answered the Smasher, looking significantly at Hiram, who wondered what they were talking about.

There was a long mirror let into the wall on the side that divided the back room from the hall, that the postmaster thought was a very nice piece of furniture. He was, therefore, rather astonished to see Mother Halket take a heavy cane from the umbrella rack, and hit the glass a sharp blow about the center.

"Good French plate," she remarked to Hiram, with a smile.

"Wal, I swan! I shouldn't like ter hit no mirror of mine sich a crack," exclaimed Hiram.

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when the big glass fell forward and came thwack upon the top of his head, just as the hall lamp went, and left them in total darkness.

CHAPTER IV.

THE COUNTERFEITERS' DEN.

HIRAM HAWKINS had little time to wonder what this new move meant, for, before he had time to collect such thoughts as he had, he was pushed into a narrow space—the glass being lifted off his head first—and squeezed downward into what seemed to be a bottomless hole.

"There's a ladder. Feel for it with your feet," whispered the gruff voice of Smasher Jim in his ear, and Hiram obeyed and found the ladder, descending in obedience to a powerful push downward on his shoulders by some one whom he felt sure must be the gentle Mother Halket, because he did not give credit to Smasher Jim for possessing anything like the strength of this old lady, whose character and attributes were so much at variance with her appearance.

The postmaster descended some ten or twelve feet, as nearly as he could judge, and then stepped off upon a boarded floor,

He did not have to wait long to know what he was to do, for a hand took him by the arm and led him along in the darkness, to where he had no idea.

He thought of the many stories he had heard about Chicago, and how country people were disposed of without any one being the wiser. But he was not particularly nervous, because he knew he had nothing on his person worth stealing except the ten-dollar bills given him by Smasher Jim, and it was not likely Jim would give him the money in Sangville, and then take him to Chicago for the express purpose of robbing him.

"Stand still a minute," commanded Jim, as he let go of Hiram's arm.

But Hawkins had too much curiosity to stand still a second, under the circumstances. He stretched out his arm, to feel where he was, if possible, and his hand came in contact with a rather slimy brick wall.

"Must be up ter one side of the room," he muttered. "I'll jist walk acrost it, an' find out how big it is."

He took three short, cautious steps away from the wall, and banged his face into another wall, also of slimy bricks, with a force that made him utter a loud grunt. Then he walked in the direction that he and Smasher Jim had been following, and was considerably astonished to find that he was stopped by a wooden door.

"What kind of place hev I got inter, anyhow?" he grumbled, softly. "An' where in thunder is Jim Walker?" As he uttered these words, he retraced his steps, in the hope of finding his companion, and discovered something that surprised him more than anything that had gone before. *The passage had been converted into a mere cell! A solid wooden barrier, fitted snugly into the wall on either side, extended right across the hall, about three feet behind him, and he was alone.*

Hiram Hawkins was no coward, but it cannot be denied that the perspiration gathered in great drops on his forehead now, and he was thoroughly frightened.

"This is a gol-darned dirty trick of Mr. Walker," he muttered, "an' if I hed him down in Sangville, I b'lieve I'd give him a piece of my mind. He's a dang nice fellow, but he has some of the queerest ways I ever see. An' as fer that old woman—whew!"

"What's that, Hiram?" growled Smasher Jim's voice in his ear.

And then the wooden door before him opened, and Hiram found himself in a small room, in which were a table, two chairs, and a bed on the floor, a feeble coal-oil lamp on the table enabling him to see all these things as he stepped over the threshold and wondered where Smasher Jim could be.

No sooner had Hiram entered the room than the wooden door closed with a snap, and he found, on pushing it, that it was securely fastened, although he couldn't see in what way.

"Well, Hiram. What do you think of this?" sounded in his ear so closely that he could have sworn he felt the breath of Smasher Jim on his cheek.

He turned quickly, but he was absolutely alone. A cold perspiration that ran all down his back made him shiver. This was awful! He would have given the whole of the fifty-dollars, in new ten-dollar bills, in his pocket, to have been safe in his Sangville store at that moment.

"This is the result of coming to Chicago to make money. I wish I was back in old Injianny," muttered the now thoroughly frightened postmaster, as he leaned upon the table to support his trembling limbs.

But, he was not to be allowed to rest, for the next moment the bed on the floor began to rise up in the middle, in a ghostly fashion, as if the uneasy spirit of some one who had been murdered on it long ago were about to take it on his back and walk off with it. At least, that was the notion that took possession

of Hiram Hawkins, as he fixed a stony gaze upon the awful bed.

The bed continued to rise until the whole of it was off the floor. Then it moved aside, and Hiram saw that it was not being disturbed by a ghost, but by Smasher Jim, who grinned at him, as he pushed the bed off his head, and revealed the fact that he was standing in a square hole in the floor, with only his head and shoulders above the surface.

A flood of light came up the hole, and Hiram Hawkins understood that in the secret apartment below something was going on that would not stand the public gaze.

"Come here, Hiram. Follow me," commanded the Smasher.

Hiram had repented of his bargain with Smasher Jim before this, but he was in for it now, and he saw no way of getting out. So he obeyed the order of his gruff companion, and went over to the hole, as Smasher Jim came out and stood on the floor beside him.

Smasher pointed to the hole, and said: "You will have to go first, Hiram, because I want to shut the trap and put the bed in place."

Hiram hesitated momentarily, but a savage "Hurry up!" from Smasher made him quicken his movements and descend through the hole on a ladder placed conveniently below. He had hardly placed his feet on the ladder, when it was pulled away by some one underneath, while a roar of laughter, in which he could distinguish the shrill tones of a woman's voice, proclaimed that his Somerset into the apartment was heartily enjoyed.

He dropped on the floor in a sitting posture, and as he looked around him in a dazed way, saw that several of the men whom he had left in the back parlor a few minutes ago, were down in this lower room, as comfortably as if they had been there all the evening. After this, he was not astonished to see the benevolent old lady, Mother Halket in the group, for he credited her with supernatural attributes, anyhow.

Smasher Jim was now yelling fiercely for the ladder, and the man with sandy mustache, Rufe Rourke, hastened to put it in position for the descent of Mr. Walker.

"Do a thing like that again, and there'll be trouble in this establishment," growled Smasher, as he pulled the bed over the hole, and closed the trap by means of a sliding door, that fitted so snugly as to be hardly discernible above, even if the bed were out of the way.

"What are you all doing?" he demanded, as he reached the floor of the lower room, and moved the ladder away to a corner.

"Busy," answered Mother Halket. "The boys have just got off a batch of those tens, and Rufe is getting up something in the way of five-dollar gold-pieces that will work off splendidly, I believe."

The postmaster was listening intently, and now the truth dawned upon him, as it might have done much sooner if he had not been so wise that he could never learn anything in a hurry. He was in a counterfeiters' den, and the work that Smasher Jim wanted him to do was to pass imitation bills at the World's Fair.

Hiram drew forth his batch of ten-dollar bills and looked at them slyly, with his back to the others in the room. Everybody else seemed to be occupied in looking at some of the new bills that had just been worked off on the lithographic press in the corner, and he thought himself unobserved.

"Looking at your money, eh? Pretty, ain't they? Couldn't tell the difference, could you? You'll have an easy job, and make money enough before the fair is over to buy up the whole of Sangville."

It was the gentle, but mocking voice of Mother Halket, and as Hiram turned quickly he saw that she was looking over his

shoulder, and enjoying his doubt over the money.

Hiram did not answer, but a resolution passed through his mind that the quick eye of Mother Halket saw written in his face in a minute, for there was an unwonted fierceness in her usually mild face, as she whispered, hoarsely:

"Don't you do it!"

"What?"

"Oh, you can't fool Mother Halket. You are thinking that, as soon as you get out of this house, you will give it away to the police. Before you could say a word you would find that there was some one right on your heels, and— Did you ever get a crack on the head with a sand-bag?" she asked, breaking off suddenly, and changing the subject.

"No."

"Well, it is the nicest thing in the world. Leaves no mark, and drops you like a steer at the stockyards. Take my advice, and do not try to talk to the police while you are in Chicago."

With a significant smile that was anything but mirthful, and that even Hiram Hawkins, with his thick head, understood meant death, Mother Halket turned to Smasher Jim, who was critically examining one of the new \$10 bills in front of the lamp with a very powerful reflector, and said, quietly:

"Better give Mr. Hawkins some gold as well. He has \$50 in notes. Then he can go out to-night, and work off some of the stuff on the fakirs around the gates of the Fair. The people are coming out now, and he ought to do at least a hundred dollars, if he is as smart as I think he is."

"All right. Let him take the oath first."

"Gol-darn yer! I won't take no oath! Yew can't make me, nuther!" yelled Hiram at this juncture, as he dashed out of the circle of men that had formed around him, and kicked over the big lamp with its powerful reflector.

"Fix him!" hissed the Smasher, as he brought one of the other two lamps on brackets at the side of the press, and placed it on the table.

Mother Halket seized the powerful Indian by the arm, and swung him around as easily as if he were a child, and Rufe Rourke drew a red-hot iron from the brazier over which a crucible full of metal for the manufacture of the gold pieces was suspended, and flourished it in front of Hiram's eyes.

"Great snakes! What air you going tew dew?" cried the postmaster, in an agony of fear.

"Go ahead with the branding!" ordered Smasher, savagely. "Give him one on the arm, and if that don't fix him, let him have it on the cheek."

"Hold on! Hold on!" shrieked Hiram.

"His arm, I tell you!" yelled Smasher.

Hiram Hawkins was powerless in the hands of Mother Halket, who was now assisted by a big ill-favored fellow, evidently in deep awe of Smasher Jim.

Rufe Rourke had brought the hot iron into uncomfortable proximity to Hiram's face, and it really seemed as if he were about to place it against his cheek, when it was suddenly snatched from his hands, and thrown to the other side of the room, while a fist shot out and landed squarely on Rufe's chin.

"T'under an' houn's! Phwat's thot?" cried Rourke, staggered by the blow. "Phwere is the mon phwat would dare to do thot to a Rourke?"

"Right here!" replied the owner of the fist, a rather short, but stoutly-built man in sailor's garb, with a luxuriant crop of whiskers worn in true sailor fashion all over the lower part of his face.

"Who is this fellow?" demanded the Smasher, advancing upon the sailor threateningly.

But, Mother Halket interfered, and stand-

ing between Smasher Jim and the sailor, said, quietly:

"He's all right. He's one of us. He came half an hour ago and gave the password, and I let him in."

"Phwell, be me sowl, he's pretty fresh fer a new man. If it was not for the explanation yez give, Mrs. Halket, Oi'd make him go lookin' aroun' fer a new face, so Oi would!" grumbled Rufe Rourke, eying the sailor with extreme disfavor.

"Shut up," was the brief order of Smasher Jim. Then, turning to Mother Halket, he continued: "You say this man is all right?"

"I'll answer for him," was Mother Halket's response.

"Then he will be the man to go with Mr. Hawkins. He is a stranger in Chicago, I know. There are none of our gang here that I am not acquainted with, and I never saw his face before. Where have you been operating?" he asked, of the sailor, who was carefully lighting a cigar from the brazier, and looking at a pile of new ten-dollar notes on the table by the side of the press, as he did so.

"Just got through doing time at the Western Penitentiary at Pittsburg," answered the other, in very hoarse tones. "And I caught a cold as soon as I got out. Not used to the free air, you know."

The Smasher grinned condescendingly, as he observed: "Yes, I know how that is. Been there myself. Been at my country home at Columbus for several years, living a very quiet, regular life. However, that is neither here nor there. I want you to go to the Fair grounds with this gentleman—Mr. Hawkins, from Sangville, and help him work off some stuff. I'll give you some, too."

He counted out ten of the notes to the sailor, and then gave him ten of the gold-pieces from a pile that lay at the side of the brazier, on a table, where they had been submitted to several processes to make them appear a little worn. Counterfeiters seldom allow money to go out looking too new.

Arrangements completed, Smasher Jim opened a panel door that slid easily and noiselessly, and the sailor stepped through.

Hiram hesitated, but a savage push from Smasher Jim made him go through, and the door slid into its place, leaving the two in darkness.

Then, a gas jet was suddenly turned up, and Hiram Hawkins experienced another surprise, for his sailor companion pulled off his whiskers with a quick movement, and the Sangville sage found himself looking into the face of the young fellow whom he supposed to be hundreds of miles away—Ready Ralph, the detective!

CHAPTER V.

THE LIGHTNING EXPRESS.

WE must go back a little to find out how it was that Detective Ralph managed to be on deck in Chicago after being left in such an awkward position in the neighborhood of Sangville.

It was true that he had been tied up in the woods between Sangville and Stony Creek, as Smasher Jim had said, but he did not have to stay there till the workmen got through their labors at six o'clock in the evening. He had been in tight places too often before to wait quietly for some one to come and help him out, and it was not fifteen minutes after Hiram and Smasher had left him before he had managed to get out of his bonds and was sitting on the grass enjoying a cigar. He sat there an hour thinking. Then he got up and made his way toward the store in Sangville in which he had written the letter to his chief that had been confiscated by the man he was determined to capture, dead or alive, within a week.

"You have fixed yourself now, Smasher

Jim. I have evidence enough to send you up for twenty years, even without the additional charge of tampering with a letter in the United States mail!" observed the detective to himself, as he walked leisurely toward the store. "You will find that I am on deck, in spite of your benevolent intentions concerning me."

He had just entered the main street of the village, when a young girl, whom he recognized as the daughter of Hiram Hawkins, came fluttering toward him, her light summer dress and daintily-trimmed straw hat showing more taste than is usual to country girls, while her manner of walking was that of the self-possessed young lady who has lived in a big city, and would rather be dead than gawky.

The fact was that Lucy Hawkins had spent two or three years in a Chicago academy, and had acquired a city polish that was the secret envy of all the girls in Sangville, and that made the young men regard her as something too lovely for them to aspire to, in spite of the undoubted truth that three fourths of them cherished a hopeless love for the pretty daughter of the postmaster, storekeeper and editor combined.

There was a look of worry on Lucy's face now, however, that indicated how little she was thinking about admirers at that moment.

She stopped the detective with a motion of her little hand, as she asked, eagerly:

"Do you know what my father is going to do in Chicago? I saw that Mr. Walker look at your letter, and I was afraid to say anything. Then, when he attacked you, I thought father would be able to give you all the help you might need, but—"

"You were going to say he turned around the other way, I suppose," interrupted Ralph.

"That's nothing. Smasher Jim would wheedle the devil himself. It was not much of a task for him to make your father believe me a crook, and the upshot of it was they took me into the woods, in the belief that I should be punished for my wickedness by having to stay there all day."

"How dreadful!" exclaimed the young girl, softly.

The detective laughed, although he felt pleased by the girl's evident sympathy, too.

"It didn't work, you see," he remarked, lightly. "And here I am, on deck again."

"On deck!" repeated the girl, musingly. "When I was at school in Chicago, there was a girl there whose father was in a Government office at Washington, and I have heard her talk about a young detective she met at her father's house once. He was in the Secret Service, and his favorite remark was that he was 'on deck,' whenever he was told off for any duty. From that they called him the 'Always on deck' detective."

The young man smiled again, and the girl added, impulsively:

"Something tells me that you are—"

"Ralph, the Secret Service detective," put in Ralph. "Yes, Miss Lucy. I am the individual. And now that I have confided in you so far—"

"Because you could not help it," interrupted Lucy, with a mischievous smile.

"Exactly. Because I could not help it. I will tell you that I am here on the track of the man who has taken your father to Chicago—James Walker, known to the police and crooked fraternity as Smasher Jim, the most expert manufacturer of counterfeit money in the country, and a dangerous man."

"My poor father!" murmured Lucy. "He thinks he is so smart, and that no one can fool him, and yet he is as simple as a baby in some things, especially in the hands of any one who can flatter him, and make him believe he is a great man."

"I am afraid he is in bad hands now, Miss Lucy," observed the detective, gravely.

"What can we do to save him?"

The two had been walking quietly along in the direction of the store, and now, as they approached it, Sam Stokes hastily swallowed a pickle he had taken from his favorite jar, and coughing violently, stepped outside the door to watch them.

"Lucy's struck a mash, I do believe," he muttered. "Well, I don't low no sich goings on around here while the boss is away. Sides, I am kind o' stuck on Lucy myself."

His reflections were interrupted at this point by a violent fit of coughing, as the vinegar on the pickled cucumber caught his breath again, and ere he had finished coughing Ralph and Lucy were at his side.

"They left half an hour ago, on that noon train," Lucy was saying, continuing their conversation, "and are going straight to Chicago."

"When is the next train?" asked the detective.

"There ain't no next train to Chicago," interrupted Sam Stokes, gaspingly, for he was still suffering from the effects of the vinegar. "This ain't no metropolus, where trains run every ten seconds. The only train going west what stops here, barring the accommodation, is that one at noon, what the boss and his friend went on."

"That's so. Sam Stokes is right," said Lucy, regretfully.

"Any trains go through without stopping?" asked Ralph.

"Yes. But what's the use o' them if you want ter go ter Chicago? You can't jump on when they're going. They're a little too swift for you, unless you are a sight more spry than I think you are," observed Sam, contemptuously.

"Sam?" said the detective, quietly.

"Holler!" responded Sam.

"Don't talk so much."

"Don't talk so much?" repeated Sam Stokes. "Wal, now, I guess I'll talk jist as much as I please. I ain't no jay! I'm a—"

But what Sam was will never be known, for Ready Ralph seized him gently, but firmly, by the back of the neck, and actually stood him on his head, holding him there for a few seconds, until he got alarmingly red in the face, when the detective placed him right side up, a decidedly astonished and very meek boy.

"Gosh! Who'd ha' thought he had so much muscle?" was Sam's smothered comment, as he retreated into the store, and sought the pickle-jar again.

"There is a train through here for Chicago in half an hour—the Lightning Express," said the girl, who was anxious to help the detective in any possible way that would be likely to enable him to go to Chicago to her father's assistance, who, she was now convinced, was in danger, all the greater because he was so utterly unsuspecting.

"In half an hour? That will do. Can you give us something to eat and drink, quick?"

"Yes. I got some coffee and cold meat ready for father and that man before they went away, and it is there yet. The coffee is on the stove. I meant to have my own dinner, but I got to thinking about things and I went out, in the hope of seeing you," answered the girl.

They went into the room behind the store, where the girl poured out coffee for herself and Ralph, and, at his suggestion, ate something as well, he setting the example by attacking the cold meat and bread and butter with the earnestness of a man who was uncertain when he would get another meal.

In ten minutes the detective had finished his meal, and then he said, suddenly, looking straight into Lucy's eyes:

"Can you trust me?"

She returned his gaze, and answered, unhesitatingly:

"I can, and do."

"Then go and put on a dark dress and hat, and in your pockets put whatever you may need for traveling. You must go to Chicago with me, and we shall go on that train that will pass through here in about a quarter of an hour—if it is on time."

The girl did not make any reply, save a nod of acquiescence, and disappeared into an inner room.

"Good! That's the style of girl I admire," observed the detective, half aloud. "Even when I told her she must put all her baggage into her pockets, she wasn't phased a bit. Some girls would want to take a trunk as high as a house, and would spend a day or two packing it. Now for that train."

He went out to the railroad and looked in the direction of the east. There was a level stretch of track for miles at this point, and he knew that he would be able to see the train for at least ten minutes before it reached the Sangville station.

It was not in sight yet, and running back to the store, he seized a large, red shawl that he noticed hanging on a line at the end of the counter, Sam Stokes watching him with open mouth, but not considering it wise to hazard any remark, after his experience of the strength and activity of the detective. Ralph tied the shawl to a broom that he took from a number evidently there for sale, and, with a piece of a string used for tying up parcels, fastened the shawl to the broom, so that it made a very respectable flag. Then he hastened back to the railroad track, and placed his ear on one of the rails.

"Ah! There she comes! I can hear her, although she's not in sight yet. I shall have to hurry!" muttered the detective. "Sam!"

Sam Stokes had followed him to the track, and answered at once with a respectful:

"Sir!"

"Help me carry this old tree to the track," directed the detective, pointing to a small apple-tree that had been blown down or struck by lightning, and that was lying close to the track. It was not very heavy, but its limbs spread in all directions, and it would make a formidable-appearing obstruction on a railroad. The detective knew that the engineer would see it in plenty of time, even if he were not warned by the red flag.

"You are not going ter wreck the train, are yer?" asked Sam.

"You are talking too much again, Sam," remarked the detective, significantly. "Catch hold of that tree."

Sam obeyed, and the tree was soon deposited on the track, but on the side going east, so that, if by any chance, the train were not stopped in time, it would not be injured.

"There is nothing coming along from the west about this time, is there Sam?" asked Ralph.

"No. Not till the evening."

"All right, then. Go into the house, and tell Miss Lucy to be ready to come right away. The train is in sight."

"I am here," spoke Lucy, herself, as she appeared at the side of detective, in a neat dark-blue costume, carrying an umbrella and a small sachel.

The detective glanced at her admiringly, but did not speak, as he picked up his danger-signal, and ran down the track toward the approaching train, as fast as possible.

"Confound that engineer! Can't he see this signal?" muttered Ralph, as he swung the red shawl to and fro. "I hope the sun doesn't blind him. I should think he could see this red shawl ten miles away, almost."

The Express train came thundering along, and Ralph began to be afraid that the train really would not stop.

"Perhaps he can see that that tree is on the other track, and doesn't care a durn!" thought the young Headquarters detective.

Just as Ralph had almost made up his mind that this was the case, he heard the

squeaking and hissing of the Westinghouse air-brakes, as the engine emitted several loud whistles and the grinding of the wheels gave token that the brakes were doing their work, and that the train would soon be stopped.

Ralph threw down his broom and red shawl, and ran toward Lucy.

"Jump aboard as soon as it stops," he said, hurriedly. "Don't take any notice of the train hands. I'll fix the conductor."

"Very well."

There was no excitement to be discerned in either the manner or tone of the girl, as she stood ready to obey implicitly the directions of the detective.

Just as the engine reached the spot where Ralph had thrown down the shawl, and within twenty yards of the tree on the track, the train came to a standstill.

The wheels had not stopped turning, when the conductor, a stout, choleric man, with a red face, sprung from the baggage-car, next to the engine, and demanded what in thunder all this meant.

"Here, Dan! Will!" he yelled to two of his train hands, "come and take this fellow, and put him in the baggage car. He's some infernal tramp, I suppose. But he can't stop my train and not pay for it. I'll send him to State Prison for twenty years! If I don't I'll be—"

"Hold on, there!" interrupted Ralph, coolly. "Simmer down!"

There was something in the tone of the young man that told he was of some importance, and the brakeman and baggage-man, who had been advancing upon him, stopped involuntarily.

But the conductor was so indignant at being told to "simmer down," and by a mere boy, too, that he became redder than ever, and Ralph was afraid of apoplexy. So he hastened to relieve the strain on the conductor's mind, by showing him that he had authority to stop his train.

Throwing back his coat, he showed a small silver button of peculiar shape, and then, as he saw that the conductor had cooled off considerably, he drew from his pocket a paper signed by the superintendent of this division of the road, which was one of a number of papers that Ready Ralph always took care to have with him, in case of necessity.

The conductor glanced at the paper—which had much more weight with him than the badge, by the way, and his manner changed. He held out his hand to the detective, and Ralph, with a smile, took it and shook it heartily.

"You'll excuse me, I know, Mr. Rapier," said the conductor. "Of course, this is different. But I was just trying to make up ten minutes we lost on account of a little freight wreck down the road, and you know how a man feels."

The detective nodded, and jumped aboard the nearest coach to make his way to Lucy, who was sitting quietly waiting for him, and who had been watching the controversy between the conductor and Ralph with amused interest.

"All aboard!" cried the conductor, as he signaled the engineer to go on, and Lucy and Ready Ralph were on their way to Chicago to look after Hiram Hawkins and frustrate the plans of Smasher Jim, whatever they might be.

CHAPTER VI.

A PLUNGE TO DEATH.

THE big Ferris wheel was making its last turn for the night. The thousands of visitors to the World's Fair on that day were moving in a steady stream toward the exit gates of Jackson Park, but there were enough left even now to have filled every car of the great wheel many times over.

Among those who took a seat in a car of the wheel to enjoy the prospect of Chicago at

night were a countrified-looking man and a younger man, with big whiskers, in the garb of a sailor. The two men were Hiram Hawkins, the postmaster, and Detective Ralph Rapier.

The detective wanted to get Hiram away from the men that he was confident were shadowing them, at the command of Smasher Jim, and he suddenly bethought him that if he could get into one of these cars it would be impossible for the "shadow," whoever he might be, to follow them without his identity being revealed. Ready Ralph had seen the faces of all the men in the counterfeiters' den, and he was positive that he would know any of them who might come within reach of him.

The car was nearly full. Only three of the revolving chairs had not yet been occupied, and there were a score of people on the platform anxious to get on the car.

At this moment, an eager, worried-looking man, whom Ralph recognized as the superintendent of the movements of the wheel, came into the car and spoke hurriedly to a man who sat next to the detective, and who the detective found, from the conversation, was also connected with the wheel, in some way.

"There is a bolt out at the top of the tower on the south side," the new-comer was saying, "and I want to get it fixed right away."

"Why?" asked the other, coolly. "What difference does it make? You might take a hundred bolts out up there, and it would not make any appreciable difference in the strength of the wheel. Let it stay out. It isn't hurting anything."

"No. I want it fixed. I pride myself on this wheel being perfect in every respect, and I couldn't sleep comfortably to-night if I knew that bolt was out of place."

"You are too particular."

"Maybe. But, that's my way. The trouble is there isn't anybody around that can do it. All the workmen have gone home, and there is no way of getting up there except by climbing, and it takes a mighty good 'rigger' to climb one hundred and forty feet. I would give twenty dollars to get that bolt put in place to-night."

"I'm your man," interrupted Ralph. "I could not help hearing what you were saying. I will go up there and fix the bolt, if you will tell me what to do."

The worried-looking man took in Ralph from head to foot, and was evidently satisfied with his inspection.

"It will be worth twenty dollars if you can do it."

"I can do it," answered Ready Ralph, with a quiet confidence that strengthened the good impression he had already made. "Just tell me what I am to do when I get up there, and you can rest assured it shall be done."

"Well, there is a bolt worked loose. It is only a small one, but I don't like anything to be out of place. I saw it through my field-glass before it got dark, but it slipped my memory till just now in the rush of business. You can take this hammer and give it three or four strokes, and it will be all right."

The worried-looking man showed Ralph a heavy hammer that he carried in his left hand, and the detective took it in his hand, as he arose from his chair to go out of the car.

"It takes twenty minutes for the wheel to go around," he whispered to the postmaster. "You stay in the car, and I guess I'll be down by the time you have made the trip. If I am not, wait below at the platform for me."

Ralph Rapier stepped out of the car, and as he did so a tall man, with a sandy mustache, brushed past him, in entering the car, taking a seat in one of the three vacant chairs already referred to, behind Hiram

Hawkins, and on the inner side of the wheel, so that he could watch the operations of Ready Ralph, if he wished to do so.

As the sandy-mustached man took his seat, another man, with long white beard and spectacles, immediately behind him, leaned forward and whispered something in the other's ear, causing him to start and make a half-smothered exclamation.

"Keep your mouth shut, Rourke," growled the old man in tones that Ralph would have recognized at once as those of Smasher Jim. "He is playing right into our hands now. You go out as soon as he starts to climb, and offer to help him. You can easily make the boss of this concern think one man can't do it. And as for climbing, why, you can climb as well as any of them."

"But are you sure that is Ralph Rapier?" asked Rourke, doubtfully.

"Am I sure?" repeated the Smasher, impatiently. "Do you suppose he could put on whiskers enough to fool me? I knew him at once, but it wasn't my game to let him know it while he was in the crib. We couldn't have settled him there. It would have been too dangerous. Somebody might have seen him go in, and there would have been an investigation, with ruin for all of us, to say nothing of the possibility of a little hanging business."

Rufe shuddered.

"All right. I'll go. But what am I to do when I get up there?"

"What are you to do? Well, if you don't know what to do when you find yourself up there with a detective, who is not as strong as you are, it is no use my giving you instructions. Accidents are always likely to happen in a place like that. It is 140 feet above the ground, and there is nothing to prevent his getting dizzy and falling off, is there?"

Rourke turned a little pale, but he did not reply. He got off the car just before the door was closed, and the Smasher saw him in close confab with the worried-looking man. Then, just as the car began to move, the Smasher saw the man hand him a hammer, and he knew that Rufe Rourke and Ready Ralph would be on deck together, 140 feet in the air, so soon as both could get there!

He looked out of the window, and saw Ralph shinning up the great steel buttresses that looked so light from a little distance, but were so massive in reality. A few yards below, Rufe Rourke was following the boy, and both were going up hand-over-hand at a pace that seemed remarkable to many who were watching them, and who admired their agility and strength.

The lithe Ralph, following the rule of all sailors and others who are accustomed to climbing to great heights, kept his gaze fixed above him, and thus was unaware that he was to have a companion when he reached the axle. Rufe, on the other hand, kept close watch on the lad, and there was a vindictive twitch about his mouth, and a dangerous gleam in his eye, that told how ready he would be to carry out the orders of his chief, and send the detective headlong to the ground, if he could only get a chance.

At last the detective reached the place where he was to work. He paused a moment to take breath, and to admire the splendid scene. Although the night was not a very dark one, there being a moon in its second quarter, the electric lights glittered and blazed all around him so brilliantly, as to throw the moon into a position of secondary importance. He could distinguish the moving crowds in the Midway Plaisance at the foot of the towers supporting the wheel, and he could trace the line of humanity extending to the exit gates, and the hundreds of cars and other vehicles going in all directions in the city, the great height at which he stood making them appear to be crawl-

ing, although they were really moving at their usual rapid pace.

It was only for a few moments that the detective stood, hammer in hand, admiring the prospect. Something close to him claimed his attention—something that his instinct told him meant trouble.

A man's head suddenly burst into a circle of light thrown by one of the great electric burners on the tower, emerging from a shadow deep in proportion to the brilliancy of the light, and he recognized the head as belonging to Rufus Rourke.

The young detective turned toward the bolt that he was sent to fix, and with three or four hearty blows of his hammer had it firmly in place, so that it would surely have satisfied the worried-looking man could he have been there to see it.

As Ralph concluded his task, he turned to look at the man who was climbing rapidly toward him, and who was now nearly within reach of the iron platform on which Ralph stood, and that afforded rather insecure footing for any one save a sailor or a "rigger."

"Well?" exclaimed the detective, interrogatively, as Rufe stood beside him.

"Phwell yeself!" was Rufe's rejoinder.

"What are you doing here?"

"The same as yeself—looking at the scenery."

"Funny place to come."

"Then, phwat made ye come?"

"Sent here," said the detective.

"So wuz Oi."

"What for?"

"To give a bolt a crack wid me hammer."

"The bolt is all right. I have just done the work on it."

"Yez hove? Phwell Oi'd loike ter hove er look at it me own silf, if yez are not raising any objection," observed Rufe, with laborious politeness.

"Go ahead!" said the Secret Service detective.

Rufe Rourke had been taking in the situation during the foregoing colloquy. He knew that the detective was strong, and as active as a cat, and that, if he was to overcome him, he must take him by surprise. At the same time, he had made up his mind that Ralph Rapier should never go down from that tower alive!

"Oi can't git at it unless ye move a little, do ye see?" suggested Rufe, edging closer to the detective.

"All right! I'll get out of your way. But, we shall have to move carefully, or one of us will tumble off, and then there won't be enough left to make a decent funeral."

The two men were standing on a steel beam not more than two feet wide, and both were holding tightly to a spoke of the wheel running out from the great axle—an axle that was thirty-two inches in diameter, and weighed fifty-six tons.

For Rufe to get at the bolt so that he could deliver a stroke upon it with his hammer, it would be necessary to pass Ralph on this two-foot-wide steel beam. His object was to pass inside, so that he would perhaps be able to push the detective off by the sheer weight of his body. Otherwise, he would be at the mercy of the boy, and, although he had no reason to suppose that Ralph harbored any evil intentions against him, his guilty conscience made him nervous.

"Phwell, hold on, toight, phwile I crawl along here," he said, as he forced his way between Ralph and the spoke of the wheel to which both were clinging.

"Careful!" warned Ralph. "This is no place for fooling. You nearly pushed me off then."

"Faith! That would be too bad. Oi didn't thry ter do it. Do ye think Oi did?"

Here was where Rufe Rourke overreached himself. Although Ralph could not understand why this man should be up here at all, he had thought at first that it was a mere

freak, as in his own case, because he was used to climbing, and liked the adventure. But now, when Rufe asked him with some earnestness whether he (Ralph) thought Rufe was trying to push him off, the detective was sure that the fellow had a sinister motive.

"Can it be possible that I have been recognized, and that this is the 'shadow,' with orders to wipe me out, if possible? Yes, it must be so. Ralph Rapier, you are in a tight place, and it will take all the smartness you possess to remain on deck, I'm thinking."

These thoughts passed through the brain of Ralph with lightning rapidity, while he was stiffening himself to resist any onslaught that might be made by his companion.

The immense wheel had been moving at intervals, but very slowly, so that it was easy for the two men to seize one spoke, as they were compelled to let go of another when it passed out of their reach with the motion of the wheel.

Rufe had been squeezing himself between the detective and the wheel in his efforts to get past, and Ralph could feel that considerable pressure was brought to bear on him, and that if he did not hold tightly he would soon be a smashed and unrecognizable heap at the foot of the tower.

The wheel had stopped just as Rufe began to squeeze past, but it went on again when he was fairly between the detective and the spoke, so that Ralph had one arm each side of Rufe, whose back was pressed against the young man's chest.

"He's trying to shove me off! There's no doubt about it!" thought Ralph. "But he cannot do it. I have too tight a hold upon the spoke with my two hands."

It was at this critical moment that the wheel began to turn again.

The detective felt the spoke moving away from him, and he knew that he must release his hold to take hold of the next. If Rufe would only move his hand at the same instant the detective would be safe, because his adversary could not push him while he was changing his own hold.

Rufe had long arms, and the detective knew perfectly well that this would give the ruffian an advantage over him.

The detective held on as long as he could, and then, while Rufe still held to the spoke, Ralph was obliged to let go to take the next one, if he could.

It was at this instant that Rufe Rourke, who was biding his time, exerted all his strength and gave the detective a push that was irresistible.

Ralph made a futile grasp at the spoke, at the wheel, at the beam, at Rufe, at anything to save himself, and then fell backward head-first!

CHAPTER VII.

LUCY IN BAD HANDS.

At the time that Hiram Hawkins was being guided through the secret passages of the counterfeiters' den on the West Side, a young girl was pacing a comfortable private parlor in a large hotel at the corner of Lake and Dearborn streets, Chicago.

For half an hour she paced the room and worried, and then, as she thrust aside the lace curtain mechanically to look out of the window she became conscious that some one just across the street was looking at her.

The person was not one to cause much apprehension by her appearance. She was a benevolent-looking old lady, with white hair and wearing spectacles, as Lucy could easily see, for the great arc electric lights made the street almost as bright as day. She was neatly and rather expensively dressed, and altogether looked like a woman who had a comfortable balance at her banker's and was accustomed to moving in good society.

As Lucy looked at her she caught the old lady's eye, and was then rather surprised to see that she was signaling to her to open the window.

The old lady disappeared into the hotel, and Lucy said to herself that this was as strange an adventure as she had met with in the last twenty-four hours, and she had had rather an interesting time since the appearance of Smasher Jim and Ready Ralph in Sangville, too.

She was still thinking over the strange circumstances that had brought her to Chicago, when there came a knock at the door, and the bell boy ushered into the room the old lady, who had told the people in the office that Miss Hawkins was a dear friend, and that she was waiting for her visitor to go up.

"My name is Mrs. Halket," commenced the old lady, as soon as she had seated herself, which she did with as much self-possession as if she were in her own home.

"Yes?" said Lucy, more mystified than ever, for she had never heard the name.

"Your father is in the city, and he wants to see you," were the old lady's next words, uttered with perfect coolness.

The girl sprung from her seat in an agony of excitement.

"My father? Where is he? Is he all right?"

"No. He is not exactly all right. I am afraid he has fallen into bad hands. There is a young bunco-steerer, known to the police as Ralph Rapier, who is leading him off, and who will get him into jail as sure as he is alive, unless you can persuade him to quit the young man's company."

"I know Mr. Rapier to be an honorable gentleman, who is in the employ of the Government, and who would be the last to lead my poor father into evil doings, even if he could do it."

"Ralph Rapier is a pretty smart young man. I see he has deceived you entirely. Will you come with me, and allow me to convince you that he is not such a good man as you think he is?"

"He told me to keep quiet, and as soon as he heard anything he would let me know," murmured the young girl, doubtfully.

"Of course he did. That was his game. No doubt he will bring your father to you after a while, but he will have got him into some scheme by that time, so that he will be completely in the power of Mr. Rapier, who will threaten to expose him to the police if he kicks over the traces. See?"

"You say you can take me to my father. Where is he?"

"At my house. I keep a fashionable boarding-house, and both he and Ralph Rapier came there to-day. I knew them both, although they did not know me. I have friends in Sangville, and have often been there. I know your father keeps the store and post-office, and I heard the other day that he had bought the Sangville *Herald*, and was making a very good paper of it. He is a smart man, is Hiram Hawkins."

The result of Lucy's conversation with Mother Halket was that, in ten minutes the two were seated in a closed carriage, and being driven in a roundabout way to the counterfeiters' den on the West Side.

When the carriage stopped, and the old lady, getting out briskly, first paid the driver and dismissed him, and then opened the door with a latch-key, Lucy could not help thinking the house looked like anything but a fashionable residence.

Into the hall and then into the front room, and Lucy found herself in a comfortably furnished apartment with a bookcase, filled with standard works of science, art, travel and fiction, against one wall, and an open piano, with several pieces of sheet-music on the desk occupying the other.

There were good pictures artistically arranged upon the walls, and a large crayon

of Mother Halket upon an easel, draped tastefully with a silk scarf.

"Excuse me a minute, my dear, and I will bring you a cup of tea. I will find out whether your father is at home, at the same time," said Mother Halket, kindly, as she left the room, with a cheerful smile.

Once outside the room, Mother Halket noiselessly locked the door, and went into the back room, where two men were busy counting and packing in paper, sheaves of the newly made ten-dollar counterfeit bills.

"Keep watch on the front room, boys. I have the daughter of that hayseed postmaster from Sangville in there, and I am going to keep her there for a while."

"What for? What is the use of having a woman in the house? She will only cause trouble."

"You ass!" was the polite reply of Mother Halket. "This is not a detective. I have known this girl by sight for years. She used to go to the Mountview Academy, out near Jackson Park. Besides, it is Smasher's orders to bring her here, so that he will have a better hold on the old man. See?"

Mother Halket was a cautious woman, as a rule, but she had been very neglectful in one respect since coming into the house.

While she was talking to the two men in the back room, Lucy Hawkins was looking at her through a small peep-hole by the side of the piano in the parlor. This hole was meant for the convenience of the people of the house, and was generally carefully concealed. How it came to be open now Mother Halket could not have explained. But there it was, and Lucy not only saw, but heard, everything said by Mother Halket and the man to whom she was talking.

As we have seen, Lucy was a bright, self-reliant girl, and as soon as she realized that she was in the very counterfeiters' den that Ralph had told her about, she made up her mind to get out.

When she found that the door was locked she was not surprised, after what she had heard in the back room. She did not waste time in lamentation, but ran to the window. Here she found that ingenuity had been used to prevent the escape of any one who might be confined in this parlor prison.

Although the window frames looked like ordinary wooden sashes, she found that they were really of iron or steel, which, as the panes of glass were much smaller than usual, made escape that way impossible, the window being fastened down with a complicated fastening that could not be moved except with a patent key.

Her first thought was to smash one of the panes of glass and call for assistance. But there were two or three objections to this. One was that Mother Halket and her assistants would have come into the room and perhaps have placed her in a more secure and much less agreeable prison. Another was that she perceived there were two sashes to the window, that outside being at least two feet distant from the inner one, forming a bow window, so that if she were to break a pane of glass inside, she could not touch the outside window, and she would have been no better off.

"That will not do. Now, how shall I get out of this awful place? For get out of it I will. I must warn my father, and frustrate their schemes somehow. If only I could see Ready Ralph! What a fool I was to go anywhere in this city with a stranger, even if she did look so thoroughly innocent as this terrible old woman!"

While she was blaming herself for her indiscretion, Lucy was looking through the window at the street, that was almost deserted now, for it was nearly midnight, and most of the houses were factories or offices.

Suddenly she started and could hardly suppress a cry.

Coming along on the other side of the street, were two men whom she recognized

at once as her father and Smasher Jim. The counterfeiter was holding the arm of her father, and appeared to be half dragging him along, while talking earnestly to him.

They were coming to the house, and in another minute, she heard the front door open, and her father's voice in the hall, in tones of remonstrance.

Now Lucy could restrain herself no longer. She looked hastily around the room for something that she could use as a battering-ram, and saw the piano stool. That would do. Seizing it by the feet, she swung it over her head, and dashed it against one of the panels of the door with all her force!

The heavy stool went through the wood as if the door were of paper. Again she swung the stool and again she dashed it through the other panel. She had swung it for another blow, when the door was thrown open, and Smasher Jim seized her by the shoulders, and, with brutal strength, threw her to the floor, senseless! The next moment the stool was in the hands of Hiram Hawkins, and being aimed at Smasher Jim's head with such a true aim that it would surely have ended his career there and then, had not Mother Halket wrenched the formidable weapon from the postmaster's hand, and swung him around with such force that he fell with his head against the wall, and lay, unconscious, by the side of his daughter.

CHAPTER VIII.

A RESCUE AND A COMPACT.

A SHRIEK of horror, that could be heard above the multitude of noises of the fair, arose from the Midway Plaisance as Ralph Rapier lost his balance, and went down from the beam on the great Ferris wheel, one hundred and forty feet above the ground.

As he lost his balance he saw the grinning face of Rufe Rourke above him, and even distinguished his hoarse growl of "Good-by!"

Then, in a flash, he seemed to become perfectly calm and his wits were as bright as if he had been standing on the ground, among the people, who were waiting for him to fall.

But he did not reach the ground immediately, as they feared and expected. His feet had caught in some of the network of rods and butts and he was actually hanging, head downward, by his toes.

He was three feet below the beam, swinging to and fro with the momentum given him by his fall, and every moment it seemed as if his feet must release their slight hold, and let him down.

It was a fearful position!

What Rufe Rourke was doing he could not see, but he heard the voices of people below and around him, on the ground and in the cars, telling the man to let himself down and save his companion.

But, Rufe Rourke took no notice. The wheel had been stopped, and the hardly perceptible jarring felt while it was in motion had ceased altogether. Save for the voices of those who cried to Rourke to assist the man who was apparently doomed to certain death, all was perfectly still, and it seemed to Ralph as if the stillness were supernatural.

Then came a mighty yell of "Bravo!" and Ready Ralph knew that some one was making an effort to save him.

When the young man fell, or, rather, was pushed off the beam by Rufe, Smasher Jim could not repress a slight cry of satisfaction.

The only person who noticed this ebullition of satisfaction was Hiram Hawkins, and, like an inspiration, he knew what it meant. This was a cold-blooded murder, and the victim was to be his young friend, Ready Ralph! Not if he knew himself.

The conductor of the car was looking out of the window, and was therefore not watching his passengers. At that time there was no wire netting over the windows, and Hi-

ram Hawkins, without stopping to think of consequences to himself, had thrust himself through the window, opposite to that from which he had seen Ready Ralph fall, and, hanging by his hands, let himself drop.

He had calculated his distance to a nicety, and he came squarely on the roof of the car immediately below him, which, being a little above the level of the axle, was necessarily further out than the one in which he had been sitting.

There were shouts that a man was trying to commit suicide, and Smasher Jim uttered an oath as he saw the purpose of Hiram Hawkins. He realized before most of the excited people in the car and on the ground, that it was possible to get to Ready Ralph from the roof of the car, and that that was the intention of the postmaster from Sangville.

"Curse that old jay! I'll make him sick before I am through with him!" muttered Smasher Jim, through his set teeth.

But Hiram Hawkins did not hear this threat, and would not have cared if he had. Hiram Hawkins was in the habit of boasting that he was not afraid of anything when his blood was up, and, to his credit, it must be said that he was not.

"Gol-durn the thing! I'll show these here folks that Injianny people has as much sand as them in Chicago! Blame my cat ef I don't!" remarked the postmaster to himself, as he cautiously drew himself up from the roof of the car to the powerful spoke that supported it, and that led directly to the spot where Ralph Rapier yet hung by his toes, waiting patiently for some one to rescue him, and prepared to die like a man, if he must.

The shouting had ceased now. The vast throng below, as well as those in the cars, were watching alternately the young man, who hung in such an awful position, and the brave countryman risking his own life to save another. As for Rufe Rourke, he was clinging to the spoke, as he stood on the beam, as if paralyzed with fear. He was frightened, but not of falling. He was wondering if he would find himself in the hands of the police, if the young man were saved, and wishing he could shake the huge structure upon which he stood so that it would jolt Ralph into eternity. But he might as well have tried to shake one of the great eighteen-story buildings in the heart of Chicago as to make any impression on the Ferris wheel in that way.

"Ef I'd knowed I had ter dew all this here climbing, I'd 'a' put on climbing clothes," muttered Hiram, who found his thick boots, and heavy coat of blue jeans rather cumbersome. "Never mind! Blamed ef I don't git thar somehow!"

He was crawling out on the spoke very cautiously, Smasher Jim mentally cursing him at every foot of his progress, until at last he reached the center, and was very close to Ralph.

"Don't let go now, Ralph, or I'm blamed ef it won't be a mean trick on me," said Hiram to the young man. "Now I've taken all this here trouble, I think you ought ter belong to me."

He was talking thus as much to encourage the young man as anything else, for he thought he could see that Ralph was about to give way, and it was as well to let him know that succor was near, so that he would think it worth while to hold on a little longer.

"Hurry up!" said Ralph, faintly. "The blood has got to my head very badly."

"All right. I'll have yer out of this in a jiffy."

The postmaster stretched himself along the spoke, lacing his legs around it like an eel, and then, letting himself hang over, got a good solid hold of Ralph's ankles.

"Kin yer kind of crawl up yerself, like they does in the circus?" he asked.

"I'll try," answered Ralph, "although my strength has pretty well given out."

He knew what Hiram meant, and, giving himself a jerk, that made his toes slip off their slight hold and pulled painfully at Hiram's arms, so that they almost seemed as if they would start from their sockets, he doubled himself, until he was bent with his face opposite his knees. This is a trick often performed by trapezists, but is not an easy thing for ordinary people to do in every-day clothes, especially when they have been hanging, head downward, for several minutes, as was the case with Ready Ralph.

When he had reached this position the young detective was obliged to rest for a moment, uncomfortable as he was in such an attitude.

"Hurry up, Ralph. Blame me ef you ain't heavy," gasped Hiram.

Ralph made another effort, and then, with a cry of joy, he found himself sitting astride the spoke, helping Hiram to sit up, too.

A mighty cheer went up as the two men, the rescuer and the rescued, shook hands heartily, while the disappointed wretch above them, and Smasher Jim, in the car, swore deeply to themselves at the almost miraculous escape of their would-be victim.

Rufe Rourke was not through yet, however, for he made a movement as if he would kick the detective in the head, and sending him whirling down, in spite of the interposition of what seemed to him the luck of the arch-fiend himself. Ralph did not see the movement, but Hiram did, and he seized Rufe's foot, and gave it such a pull, that, if he had not been holding on with both hands and a very tight grasp, he would have experienced the fate he was so anxious to see fall to Detective Ralph.

"Quit that, yew brick-dust-looking skunk, or, blame my cats, ef I don't come up thar an' lick yer in the good old Injianny style!"

"Shut up, hayseed!" returned Rufe, contemptuously.

Hiram Hawkins writhed with indignation, and if he had been on *terra firma*, instead of on such an insecure footing over nearly 150 feet above, he would have made his words good on Rufus Rourke without further parley. As it was, discretion was the better part of valor, and he contented himself with laying up the score against him, backed up by the firm intention of satisfying it at the earliest opportunity.

"How are we going tew git down out of this?" asked Hiram. "I s'pose the way I came is better than climbing down."

"Yes. You go back into the car, and I'll follow you," said the detective.

Hiram gave one more threatening glance at Rufus, and then scuttled along the spoke till he reached the roof of the car, waiting contentedly for the mighty wheel to turn, and, in the course of events, bring him down to Mother Earth again.

But Uncle Sam's detective did not follow him.

There was something to be done on the wheel before he would go away, and Rufus Rourke realized what it was in a moment.

With cat-like agility, Ready Ralph, who had quite recovered from the effects of hanging, head downward, so long, reached the small platform where Rufus stood, and, clinging firmly with one hand, clutched the fellow by the throat with the other.

The whole performance was so sudden, and Ralph appeared so little excited, that the sandy-mustached man was taken completely by surprise, and was thus at a disadvantage from the first.

He could not shake off the young man, because it would be necessary to release his hold of the spoke to do so, and that would mean a headlong plunge to the Midway Plaisance, with a bagful of broken bones all that would be left of him.

"You tried to murder me," observed Ralph, quietly.

Rufe looked sullenly into the boy's face, and then, in a spirit of recklessness that would insist on making itself manifest in spite of the disadvantage at which he was held, with the detective's hand on his throat, he gasped, in a choking voice:

"That's phwat."

"But you couldn't do it."

"It wasn't my fault."

"I like your candor," returned Ralph, who really felt some sort of admiration for the recklessness of the rascal. You are one of the most picturesque ruffians I have ever met."

Rufe did not answer, but he noticed that the detective had loosened his hold slightly while talking, and he tried to take advantage of it by suddenly wrenching himself partly away.

But the detective's fingers closed around his throat with an even tighter grip than before, and Rufe was rapidly turning black in the face, when the detective, who had no desire to kill the man, eased a little, and allowed him to regain some of his breath.

"Don't try that, Rufe. It won't pay you. I only wanted you to know that I saw through your game before we came up here at all, and if I had not been more careless than I usually am, you would never have been able to push me off this beam."

"You think you are smart. Oi could get away with a dozen kids like you, if you are a detective, who brags about being 'always on deck,'" sneered Rufe.

"Detective? Well, that is a good one," responded Ready Ralph. "I am a sailor, and I pride myself upon being always on deck when I am wanted. That's all."

"You are. Well, what made you wear false whiskers, and break into Smasher Jim's crib, pretending you was in the business?"

The detective hastily put his hand to his chin.

"Oh, they're gone," exclaimed Rufe. "They dropped off you when you went down. And now," he added, with a shriek of rage that he could not repress, "it is my turn!"

If Rufus Rourke had not indulged in his little oration, he would perhaps have accomplished his desire to put an end to Ready Ralph, but his remarks spoiled his game, for the detective, who had released him while he felt his chin for his missing beard, saw his danger, and threw himself upon Rufus with such force that he was helpless, and was obliged to hold on with all his strength to save himself as well as the detective from taking that awful plunge.

At this moment the wheel began to turn, and Smasher Jim, as he went up and over them, shot a malignant glance in the direction of the detective that was seen by that young man and that suggested a new way of dealing with Rufus Rourke.

Ralph got a good hold of the beam again, that was separate from the wheel, so that it was not affected by its motion, and then, without any appearance of ill-humor, drew a revolver from his pocket and pointed it straight at his late antagonist's head.

"Oh, of course, p'int a gun at me," exclaimed Rufe in a tone of contempt. "I haven't any weapons myself."

"You lie," responded Ralph, cheerfully.

Rufe made a motion as if he would draw a knife from his pocket, but the cold muzzle of the revolver touched his forehead, and he changed his mind, while Ralph went on:

"It doesn't matter if you have a whole arsenal about you. I have the drop on you. Now, get out of this."

He pointed downward, and Rufe, without another word, let himself down, actively and swiftly, from one rod of steel to another, till he was some ten feet below the detective.

"Stop!" commanded Ralph, emphasizing

his words with his revolver, pointed at Rufe's head.

Rufe stopped and looked up.

"You give me away to Smasher Jim or any of the gang, and I'll hang you," went on Ralph. "But, if you will go back on the gang, I'll get mercy for you in court, and it will be a good thing for you all around."

"Phwat do you mean?"

"Only that Smasher Jim is in my power, and that I am going to break up his gang right now. I wanted to get conclusive evidence, and now I have it. You are right. I am Ralph Rapier, Uncle Sam's Secret Service Detective, and I am 'always on deck.'"

Rufe Rourke stood on his thin rod of steel, below the detective, and looked up at him curiously.

"Do you know where Smasher Jim is now?" he asked.

The detective pointed to the car in which Smasher Jim sat, that had passed over the top, and was now slowly descending on the other side, Smasher having come over to another window, so that he could still watch the proceedings of the detective and Rufe.

"There he is."

"Be gob. He's a smart young 'un. Guess Oi'd better humor him," muttered Rufe. Adding, aloud: "Come down to the ground, an' Oi'll make a bargain wid yez. Oi can't afford to run with Smasher an' the gang any longer, I can see."

"You'll peach on the crowd, then, will you?" asked the detective.

"Oi wull thot."

"All right. Go down ahead of me, and I'll follow. We'll settle the details when we get down."

Rufe nodded, and began moving downward swiftly, followed no less swiftly by the detective.

There was a curious smile on Ready Ralph's countenance, as he paused for a moment to let Rufe get clear of the steel tower before he followed him to the ground, and he muttered, significantly:

"I wonder whether that fellow really believes that I trust him. If he would betray his associates without a moment's hesitation, what would he do with me if I trusted him?"

CHAPTER IX.

DETECTIVE RALPH TO THE RESCUE.

"WHERE is Hiram, I wonder?" said Ralph, involuntarily as he looked around him.

"And Smasher Jim?" added Rufe.

"Everybody is getting out now," observed the wheel superintendent. "If you mean your friends that were in the car, I guess they have gone with the crowd."

"You bet that Smasher Jim's smart," remarked Rufe, with a wink at the detective that made Ralph feel inclined to give him one in the chin that would have made his teeth rattle.

"Not too smart. Just smart enough to get himself into trouble," murmured the detective.

"Phwere are we going?" asked Rufe when the two had taken their seats in a Cottage Grove avenue cable car, and were bowling along toward the heart of the city.

"To Smasher Jim's," was the detective's short reply.

Ralph had hardly cast his eye across the mass of people, bobbing and swaying out with every motion of the car, as the gripman took off and put on his grip, when his eye met that of the very man about whom he was thinking—Smasher Jim!

As the detective caught sight of the counterfeiter, a slight movement on the part of Rufe Rourke told him that he, too, had noticed Smasher.

"You see him, then?" whispered Ralph, in Rourke's ear.

Rufe started. How did this young man know that?

"Faith, Oi c'u'dn't help seein' him, when he turned the eyes av him roight on me," grumbled Rufe, in an aggrieved tone, as if he considered the detective was suspicious of him without cause.

The car rumbled on, letting off a few of its passengers at a time, but keeping most of them until it arrived at its terminus at State street.

When it discharged its load at that important thoroughfare, the detective tried to keep Smasher Jim in his eye, but the attempt was a futile one. In the large crowd he disappeared as easily as if he had been swallowed up by the earth.

"What did yez say?"

The question came from Rufe, and the detective started, for he did not know that he had uttered a sound.

"What did I say?" he repeated.

"Nothing, ez Oi know," said Rufe. "But, faith Oi t'ought yez moight say something."

"Follow me," was the detective's brief command.

"Oi wull that."

Ralph struck westward at a good round pace, and made his way over the Madison street bridge to that network of streets on the west side of the river, in the heart of which was situated the counterfeiter's den.

"Rufe?"

"Phwell?"

"We are near the crib."

"Oi know it."

"Well, I have something to say to you, and it is this: I have a six-shooter ready to my hand, and if I see the least sign of treachery on your part to-night, I'll shoot you down like a dog. You understand?"

"Oi do thot."

The detective had had his eye on the door of the house while talking, and, although it was very dark at that spot, he was sure that he had seen two people go into the house, and that one, the taller of the two, had exhibited some reluctance, but had been dragged in by his companion.

Cautiously the detective stole along in the direction of Mother Halket's house, with Rufe by his side or just behind.

"Going ter the front door?" asked Rufe.

"No."

Next to Mother Halket's house was another house very much like her own, but next to that was a tall brick building in which various light manufactures were carried on. On the ground floor was a candy warehouse, and below the level of the street was the place where candy was manufactured, and where, in the busy season, a large number of girls were employed daily. At this time of night everything was closed, and the girls were all at home and in bed.

At the side of the house up a blind alley, that was shut off from the street by a wooden gate, easily opened from the outside, was a door leading into the cellar. This door was a solid affair, that had no visible lock, and was presumably bolted inside.

Ready Ralph went into the alley and laid his hand against the solid wooden door, looking around to make sure that Rufe was by his side.

"Who taught yez the sacret av this dure?" asked Rufe.

"Who said there was a secret?" was the quick response of the detective.

"Oh, it ain't no use thryin' ter fool yez. You know all about it," grinned Rufe, in a propitiatory manner. "But Oi didn't know ez ye got in this way ter-night, an' Oi'll bet a dollar Smasher Jim doesn't know it, ayther."

Whatever the secret of opening this wooden door might be, it is certain that Ready Ralph possessed it, for it responded to his touch, and he had pulled Rufe inside and shut the door again before that individual realized what had happened.

Ralph struck a match and lighted a gas jet, and then deliberately looked around him.

The room in which the two found themselves was an ordinary cellar of rather small dimensions that was evidently used by the candy manufacturer as a sort of store-room, for there were two or three wide wooden tubs, one containing chocolate in paste form, another cream, and still another a pink composition, that would in due time take the form of candy, and delight the younger portion of World's Fair visitors.

The detective put his finger into the cream and sucked it reflectively for a few moments as he appeared to be making up his mind as to his next move.

Ready Ralph took a bunch of keys from his pocket and opened an innocent-looking door that might have belonged to a clothes closet, but that really revealed a long dark hall, running one could not see where.

The detective made Rufe go in front of him now, and, turning off the gas jet that he had lighted in the candy-maker's room, entered the hall and locked the door after him.

"Go ahead, Rufe. You know the way."

"Oi do thot," was the only answer of the other, as he went ahead through the darkness, with the detective at his heels, holding his six-shooter in his hand, ready for instant action, although Rufe Rourke did not know it.

Fortunately for Rufe, he did not make any attempt to betray his companion, and at last they reached the ladder leading up to the hallway, which, as will be remembered, was the entrance to the subterranean portion of Mother Halket's boarding house.

The detective mounted the ladder, and, entering the recess behind the hall-rack, pushed it away a little, so that he could see what was going on, if anything.

No sooner had he taken in what was being done in the front parlor, of which he had a full view from the small crevice by the side of the rack, than he forgot all prudence, and, pushing open the door of his hiding-place with such force as to smash the plate glass mirror, leaped out and threw himself with all his force at Smasher Jim.

At the same moment Lucy Hawkins threw her arms around his neck, and, with a heart-rending sob, cried:

"Oh, Ralph, they have killed my father!"

CHAPTER X.

A LIVELY TIME FOR DETECTIVE RALPH.

SMASHER JIM recovered himself immediately. He was so much bigger than the young detective that he had not been seriously disturbed by the unceremonious way in which Ralph had dashed against him.

So, when Lucy clasped the detective around his neck and had him still more at a disadvantage, Smasher Jim caught Ralph by the neck and threw him across the room, where Mother Halket seized him with one hand and Lucy by the other, and held them so firmly that neither could move.

"Oi'll get you a poker," put in the voice of Rufe Rourke, as that worthy stepped out of the opening behind the mirror, and stood regarding the detective, held so firmly by Mother Halket.

"Don't be a fool, Rufe," said Smasher. Then, seeing Rufe's mouth open as if he were in deadly fright, he added: "Why, what's the matter with the fellow? What are you looking at—a ghost?"

But Rufe Rourke did not answer. His eyes were fixed upon those of Ralph Rapier, who was conveying to him, in unmistakable, though silent language, that it would not be safe for him to proceed any further.

"Oi'm all right, Smasher," gasped Rufe, in a low voice, as he turned his face away from the detective.

"Let them go Halket," said Smasher. "They are all right now."

Mother Halket released her hold of the detective and Lucy, but stood ready for anything that might be attempted by them.

Ralph did not move, but Lucy ran to the parlor, and knelt at the side of the door, behind which lay Hiram Hawkins, considerably dazed, but conscious. He had been given a hard blow, but his constitution was a good one, and it would take more than a thump with a piano stool to kill him.

"Now, Hiram," said Smasher, deliberately. "You see it is no use your trying to get the best of Smasher Jim. I mean to make you go out to-morrow and work off about a thousand dollars' worth of those tens and fives."

"I won't do it, consarn ye!" burst from the postmaster as he leaped to his feet. "I'm going ter git out of this here place right away, or I'll bring the police down on ye so quick ye'll never know how it was 'done,'" cried Hiram, as he tried to push past the door.

Smasher gave him a contemptuous shove backward.

"Don't be a fool, Hiram."

"What do ye mean?"

Smasher Jim thrust his face close to that of Hiram Hawkins, as he hissed, through his set teeth;

"I mean that I'm going to keep your girl here, as a guarantee that you will do what you are sent out to do. If you do not obey orders, or if you try any dirty work, in the way of bringing police, I will kill her! You understand?"

The postmaster flew at the throat of the wretch, but he was powerless to injure him, for Rufe Rourke seized him behind, and Smasher pushed him in front, and he fell in a demoralized heap against the broken hall rack, with its shattered mirror.

"Your girl will not be injured in any way so long as you do your duty, and fulfill your contract with me. If you do not, why a blow on the head, and a splash in the lake at night will do the business, and the next time you see her, if you ever do, she will not be alive!"

Ralph's eyes blazed, but he held himself in. He knew that he could do no good by interfering at this moment, and he was waiting till the time should come for him to act.

"Now, Hiram, you can go to bed. Rufe, show him his room."

Rufe Rourke beckoned to Hiram, who followed him mechanically to an upper room at the back of the house, the windows of which were secured by iron window-frames like those of the parlor in which Lucy was a prisoner.

Mother Halket had been keeping a close watch upon Ralph during this performance.

"What shall I do with this fellow?" she asked, with a look toward the Smasher.

"Nothing. I will attend to him."

As he thus spoke, the Smasher gave the girl a push into the parlor, and shut the door, although the broken panel allowed her to look out into the hall.

Hardly had the door closed, however, before the young detective, who seemed, for the moment, to be endowed with superhuman strength, flew at Mother Halket and knocked her down, aiding her tumble by dexterously putting his heel behind her, so that she lost her balance as soon as she was thrown backward.

As the old woman fell, Ralph sprung to the front door and shot back one of the bolts. In another moment he would be on the street, and free.

Smasher Jim was on the alert, however, and Ralph had hardly shot back another bolt and turned the big key that remained in the lock, when the counterfeiter was upon him.

The struggle between the two men was fierce, but short. Smasher Jim had much the advantage in size and strength, but Ralph Rapier was wiry and active as a cat,

as his adversary had already had reason to know.

"Curse you! I'll make an end of you when I get you inside," hissed Smasher, as he braced himself against the door-post, and tried to drag Ralph inside.

"Thanks. I don't mean to go inside," was Ralph's response as he wedged himself into a corner and opposed all the strength at his command to that of his burly adversary.

As the two men opposed each other at the doorway, Smasher Jim's back was turned toward the opening, so that he could not see any one who might be coming out or going in.

At the very moment that Smasher Jim felt the detective yield a little, some one was creeping through the doorway into the house.

Ralph Rapier saw the person, and opened his eyes wide as he recognized him.

It was Sam Stokes, the boy who had been left in charge of the store and post-office at Sangville!

"What in thunderation brings that boy here and how did he find out that Lucy Hawkins is in this house?" thought the detective, as he strove hard to prevent Smasher Jim getting the best of him.

Ralph did not cease his efforts to get away from Smasher Jim, although he was paying some attention to the secret ingress of Sam Stokes to the den. The counterfeiter had heard the footsteps of a policeman in the distance coming toward the house, and he redoubled his endeavors to drag the detective into the house.

The deliberate, heavy footfall of the officer came nearer and nearer. Both Smasher Jim and the detective were familiar with the peculiar step of an officer, and they would never have mistaken any other for it.

Smasher Jim wanted to get the young man out of sight, and Ralph was just as anxious to keep in sight until the officer saw him.

The slow, steady step of the officer was coming nearer and nearer, and Smasher Jim was getting desperate. But Ready Ralph was so firmly wedged in against the door that the other could not move him, try as he might.

"Let go of that doorpost, and I'll let you go," whispered Smasher Jim, determined to try whether strategy would accomplish what could not be done by physical strength.

"Thanks; I don't want to go," answered the detective with a smile that made Smasher Jim boil with rage.

"Then, curse you! Take it!" yelled Smasher Jim, in a frenzy of rage and hate.

He drew a knife from his pocket and flourished it over the detective's head.

It might have been a serious moment for Ready Ralph, only that in drawing the knife Smasher Jim was obliged to release his hold of the young fellow. Ralph had not gained his sobriquet of "Ready" for nothing, and at the instant that he felt his enemy's hold relax he slipped under his arm, and when the knife came down, with the intention of reaching his heart, the detective was in a safe position, out on the sidewalk!

Only for a second, however, was Smasher Jim at a disadvantage. The officer was not very far away now, and something must be done at once, if at all, or, as Smasher expressed it to himself inaudibly, "the fat would all be in the fire." So he seized the young man by the throat again, and began a wrestle that must end in his favor, on account of his superior strength, and because the young man had no door-post to lend its friendly aid.

The struggle had hardly begun before Smasher Jim received unexpected assistance. A neatly-dressed old lady, with white hair, suddenly darted out of the house, and grasping the young man around the waist, drew

him into the house, as easily as if he had been a small bag of rags.

"Now, hurry, Smasher! Here's a cop!" shouted the voice of Mother Halket—who was, of course, the neatly-dressed old lady—as she held the door open just wide enough for the entrance of one person, while the detective, wedged in behind the broken hall-rack, was helpless for the moment.

Smasher Jim needed no second hint. He was into the house right on the heels of Mother Halket, and closed the door with a bang, shooting the bolts and turning the key just as the officer reached the sidewalk outside, and looked rather doubtfully at the quiet boarding-house.

CHAPTER XI.

A VOICE IN THE DARK.

WHEN Sam Stokes entered the house, unseen by any one save the detective, it was with no very clear idea of what he intended to do, except that he wanted to rescue Miss Hawkins from danger.

He had received a telegram from Ready Ralph, explaining fully that Hiram Hawkins, the postmaster, was in trouble at a house in Chicago, the address of the counterfeiter's den on the West Side being given, and advising him to come to the city. He was first to call at the Commercial Hotel and ask for Ralph Rapier, and then he would be told what to do. When he reached the hotel, he learned from the rather observant clerk that Lucy had been taken away by an old woman whom he recognized, from the description given him in Ready Ralph's telegram, as Mother Halket, and Sam Stokes, who possessed the wit of a city-bred youth—for Chicago was his old home—made straight for the boarding-house of the old lady, where he had seen through the parlor window, which Lucy had not taken the trouble to hide with window-curtains or shades, the struggle between the girl and her captors, including her breaking through the panels of the door with the piano-stool.

Sam had haunted the house since, seeking an opportunity to get in without being observed, for he knew that if he were seen, his usefulness to Lucy would be gone. Smasher Jim would stop his game in a moment.

The opportunity to get into the house came at last, as we have seen, and the boy was not slow to avail himself of it.

He saw Mother Halket lying insensible on the floor of the hall, and then he heard his own name whispered softly, in Lucy's voice, and looked quickly toward the parlor door.

"Jiminy crickey! Who's been a-smashin' in of the door?" he exclaimed, in a low tone.

"Hush, Sam. Dear Sam. How did you come here?"

"Came on the cars."

"What for?"

"To help you and the postmaster."

"Who told you we were here?"

"The chap they call Ready Ralph. He sent me a telegraph, an' I took the hint and came right away. The old man had left the safe unlocked, an' I took out what I wanted ter pay my fare. I hadn't no pull on the railroad, like Ready Ralph, who made the train stop, and then bluffed the conductor."

"What are you going to do, Sam?" asked Lucy, who realized the serious character of the situation better than the boy.

"Going to get out of here."

"How?"

But Sam, instead of answering, suddenly dived out of sight, and Lucy, taking the hint, moved a little way from the broken panel of the door, but remained where she could still command a view of the front door.

She saw Mother Halket rise slowly from the floor and shake herself, a good deal like a Newfoundland dog coming from the water, while she took out her handkerchief and pressed it against a rather ugly cut on her temple, where she had struck the corner of

the hall-rack in her fall. Then the old lady went outside the front door in a hurry, and Ready Ralph came tumbling inside, quickly followed by Smasher Jim and Mother Halket.

"Things is getting hot," was Sam Stokes's inward comment.

A pause of a few moments, during which Smasher Jim was recoinnoitering through the peep-hole at the side of the front door, and then Mother Halket and Smasher Jim went into the back room, apparently satisfied that Lucy and Hiram were safe.

Needless to say, when they retired to the back room they dragged the detective between them.

Sam Stokes crouched down behind the shattered mirror of the hall-rack, so that he was unobserved by either Smasher or Mother Halket, but he managed to meet the eye of Ready Ralph, and to bestow a reassuring wink upon him.

At the same time the door was banged shut and bolted inside, the detective taking careful note of what was being done, and of the fastening of the door.

Mother Halket, who had an eye like a hawk behind her gold-rimmed glasses, understood the young man's glance at the door, and observed, in that singularly mild tone of hers:

"It won't help you, Ralph, to know that the door is only bolted, because we do not mean to let you go out of this room alive. Do we, Smasher?"

"No! Curse him! No!"

Smasher Jim was busy at a cupboard in a corner of the room, and did not take the trouble to look around as he answered the old woman, but the emphatic manner in which he spoke told that he meant what he said when he agreed with his companion as to the fate of Ready Ralph.

Smasher did not stay long at the cupboard, and when he came away Ready Ralph saw something that made him shudder, notwithstanding that he was as brave a young man as need be.

The counterfeiter had a long stocking filled with something soft and yielding in one hand, and a long sack in the other.

Mother Halket saw him start, and there was a hard vindictiveness in her tones that told what a stranger she was to any feeling of womanly mercy, as she asked Ralph, with a grin:

"Do you know what they are?"

"If he don't, I'll tell him," interposed Smasher Jim. "This stocking is filled with sand. It is a Chicago particular—a sand-bag. This sack is about seven feet long, and good and wide. When a man has been sandbagged, we just shove what remains of him into this sack, with a piece of iron at the bottom, and then we row out into Lake Michigan and dump the sack overboard."

"A cowardly trick, but such as one might expect from a skunk like Smasher Jim," said the detective, calmly.

With a howl of rage, Smasher Jim sprang toward him, and swung the sand-bag over his head.

But Smasher Jim did not strike him with his awful weapon. He was not quite ready for the murderous deed, although his momentary rage had made him inclined to commit it then. He recovered himself, and, with a snarl, struck the detective a blow on the cheek with his open hand, that made the eyes of the young man flash fire.

"Smasher Jim, I'll hang you for that," remarked the detective, in as quiet and even a tone as he might have said, "Pass the butter."

"Dead men can't hang people," was Smasher Jim's significant response, as he busied himself with a long rope that he had also taken out of that convenient cupboard, and that had become somewhat entangled.

He untied the rope, and approached the detective.

With a dexterous cast he threw a slip-knot over the detective's head and shoulders, and tightening it, suddenly, he fastened the arms of Ralph to his side with such force that he could not move them. Then he took the slack of the rope, and made two or three complicated knots in the middle of the young man's back, where it would be impossible for Ralph to reach them.

Smasher Jim looked upon his work with considerable satisfaction, and then, with the rest of the rope, that was several yards long, he took several turns around the young man's body, knotting it here and there, and passed it twice around his neck, so that he could not bend his head forward without imminent danger of choking himself to death.

"Smasher, are you going to dump him in the lake without knocking him on the head first?" asked Mother Halket.

"You've struck it," answered Smasher, composedly.

He was still working with his rope, and now he passed it around the legs of the detective, winding and knotting it, so that the detective was as firmly tied up as any Egyptian mummy in its almost endless ceremonies.

At last the task was concluded, and then Smasher stood the detective against the wall, with his face to it, satisfied that he could not move of his own volition.

The gas was turned out, leaving the room in pitchy darkness. Then the detective heard the door unbolted, felt a stream of cold air as the door was opened and then closed, and he realized that he was alone in the room, tied so that he could not move an inch, and with the prospect of a horrible death within the next hour or so—certainly before daylight.

"Must be past one o'clock," muttered the detective. "The mornings break early this time of year. They won't leave me alone long. I must do something. I wish I could see Sam Stokes, but I am afraid he will be in as bad a fix as I before long. They are sure to find him."

"If I could only get word to him in some way, or even to Lucy!"

As he uttered this wish, a thin stream of light burst from the wall against which he was standing, blinding his eyes for the moment, and at the same moment a voice, that was the sweetest in the world to him now, whispered his name almost in his ear:

"Ralph! Ready Ralph!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE ROPE TRICK.

At the first sound of this voice, it was Ralph's impulse to call out in joyous tones, but an admonitory "Hush!" told him that for once, at all events, the girl had more sense than the young man, detective though he was.

"Are you there, Ralph?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"Sam Stokes is in the house."

"I know it."

"He will get you out of there first, and then you must rescue father and me."

"I am tied hand and foot, and cannot move."

"That is bad."

"Could hardly be worse."

"Sam has been talking to me through the hole in the door. Smasher Jim has gone out, and Mrs. Halket is up-stairs. Sam says it will not be safe for him to be in the room with you more than a moment, because they have some sort of secret alarm wire connected with the door of that room, which enables them to tell when the door is opened, wherever they may be in the house. Can you not get out of the ropes?"

"I'll try what I can do," he whispered, and then the stream of light suddenly disappeared, and there was no response from the girl.

"Somebody coming, I guess," thought Ralph. "Now is the time for action."

Thus thinking he strained and tugged with all his might at the rope that bound his wrists, and, although the cruel cord sunk into his flesh in a way to cause him excruciating pain, he persevered for over a minute.

Then he uttered a slight cry of joy, impossible to repress.

The cord was beginning to yield!

For five minutes Ready Ralph pulled and stretched at the rope, the knot giving little by little, so that he felt sure, if only given time enough, he would be free.

There was the rub! If he were only given time enough!

At the end of five minutes he was very hopeful, and he found that the ingenuity of Smasher Jim had provided another difficulty for him, in case he should attempt to loosen his bonds.

The more he tugged at his wrists, the tighter became the rope around his neck, so that, to get his hands out, he would be compelled to strangle himself to death.

At this moment the stream of light showed itself in the wall, and Lucy whispered:

"Ralph."

"Yes."

"What's the matter with your voice. It sounds as if you were choking," said Lucy.

"I am choking."

"How?"

In a few words, the young man told her his predicament, but her woman's wit was fully equal to the situation.

"Then you must release yourself in some other way. If you cannot get your hands out, try your chest and shoulders. Expand your chest with all your might, and try to move your shoulders."

Ralph obeyed her directions immediately, and was overjoyed to find that he could do so without increasing the strain upon his neck. In fact, it seemed rather to relieve it.

"Well?" asked the girl.

"Lucy, you are smarter than any detective I ever met," answered Ralph, enthusiastically.

The detective was tugging at his bonds, and had now got the rope partly off his shoulders, but he kept on talking.

"How did you know what I was doing in here?" he asked.

"Through this little hole, that enabled me to listen. I could not see you, but I gathered from the conversation what was going on. It was not the first time this hole has been useful to me."

"Can you call Sam Stokes?" he asked.

"Are the cords all off you?"

"Nearly."

The girl uttered a silent prayer of thankfulness, as she tripped lightly to the broken door that separated her room from the hall, and made a slight noise, like a whispered whistle.

In an instant Sam Stokes was at the door, looking at her through the broken panels.

"Now is the time, Sam."

"All right. You can bet I ain't no kid, an' I'll get the feller out of this here fix so swift his head'll swim," said Sam.

"You dear Sam!" exclaimed Lucy.

"Oh, quit yer guying! You don't care fer me. You're mashed on Ready Ralph. You know you are."

"Sam, I'll never forgive you if you say a thing like that again," returned Lucy, smiling and blushing, in spite of the terrible situation in which she was in.

He chuckled, but the next moment he had something else to engage his attention, for he heard a gentle knock at the front door!

"That will bring the old woman down, of course," thought Sam. "I must hustle."

When Smasher Jim and Mother Halket had left Ralph in the back room, they considered him so safely tied that it would not

be worth while to fasten the door, so they left it unlocked.

"Them ducks thought they knew it all, but they fooled themselves that time," observed Sam Stokes to himself, as he opened the door and entered the room softly but swiftly, closing the door behind him.

Hardly had he done so when the step of Mother Halket sounded on the stairs and in the hall, and then he heard the front door open and close.

He felt his way carefully in the dark to the spot where he had obtained a glimpse of the detective for the moment that the door was opened, and placed his hand on his shoulder.

To Sam's joy and surprise, Ralph took him by the hand, and the boy knew that the detective was entirely free from his bonds.

"Got the rope all off yer?"

"Yes."

"Then, let us sneak."

"Not till I take Lucy Hawkins and her father with me," answered the detective, "nor until I have Smasher Jim in my power."

"You can't do all that now."

"I can, and will," declared the detective, in a determined tone.

"Look out! I can hear 'em outside," whispered the boy, excitedly.

He ran to the door and crouched behind it, with his blackjack in his hand, ready to knock down whoever might enter.

Ralph, in the mean time, with the dexterous fingers of a sailor, twisted the rope around him in such a manner that, at a superficial glance, it would appear to be tied, while really leaving him free.

Hardly had he completed his task when the door was pushed open slowly and cautiously, and some one stole into the room.

Sam Stokes sprung silently to his feet, and raised his blackjack ready to give the intruder a blow that would settle him, when he was stopped, in the very nick of time, by hearing a well-known voice exclaim, softly:

"Wal, gol-darn my boots! Ef this ain't a nice fix for a Government official to find himself in! They'll never believe it down in Sangville!"

"I'm blowed if it ain't the boss!" muttered Sam Stokes. "Now, we *will* have some fun!" Then, raising his voice slightly: "Hello, boss! How goes it?"

The light from the hall shone on the boy's face, and Hiram Hawkins looked at it for several seconds, before he said, in stern accents:

"Who is looking after the Government business in Sangville, and the Sangville *Herald*, while you are away?"

CHAPTER XIII.

THOSE PATENT HANDCUFFS.

SAM STOKES was so much taken aback by this unexpected question, at a moment when they were all in such peril, that he could not reply, and Ready Ralph came to his assistance, with:

"I'll guarantee the Government work and the paper shall be all right, Mr. Hawkins. I represent the Secret Service Bureau of the Treasury Department at Washington, and I can promise you that."

"Wal, I swan! You are there, too, eh, Mr. Rapier?"

The postmaster did not appear to be much excited over his situation, but walked calmly up to the gas-burner, and lighted it with a match that he took from his pocket, and struck on his jean trousers with a cracking noise that seemed to echo all through the house.

"Look out, Hiram! Don't you know that Smasher Jim and that terrible old woman have us in their power?" asked the detective, as he felt in his pocket to make sure that his revolver had not been removed.

"Don't you be afraid! I have everything fixed. They can fool a man from Injiauny

at first, but Hoosier grit is too much for 'em at last, you can bet your socks!"

Ralph drew his revolver, and was pleased to find that it was all ready for instant use, ere he observed:

"I have made up my mind not to stand any more of their nonsense. I'll take Smasher Jim now, dead or alive. But, at the same time, I'd like to know how you got away from that room up-stairs?"

"Easy enough! Come up-stairs and look for yourself."

In a perfect maze of wonderment, Uncle Sam's detective and Sam Stokes mechanically followed Hawkins up the stairs and into the back room, the editor of the Sangville *Herald* leading the way as coolly as if he were taking a stroll down the main street of Sangville.

Smasher Jim and Mother Halket were both lying on the floor, handcuffed together, while their ankles were secured with light steel shackles, joined by a light, but powerful steel chain about a foot in length, so that the two prisoners were fastened together hand and foot and were unable to move from the floor.

"How did you do it, Hiram?"

"Wal, you see, it was this way: The sheriff of Sangville county is a particular friend of mine, and he gave me these handcuffs and shackles to bring to Chicago, because he wants another pair made like 'em. They are made by a patent of his own, and no one can open them except him. He always keeps the key. Wal, I hadn't had time to go to the man in Chicago that was to make the new ones, but I've been carrying these around in my pocket, and to-night they came handy. Do you see?"

"But how did you get them onto these people?"

"Made him help me."

"Who?"

"Him!" repeated Hiram, pointing to a turned-up bedstead in the shape of a bookcase, against the opposite wall.

The detective, with a smile, went to the bookcase and pulled it down. As he expected, there was Rufe Rourke, nearly stifled from being shut up for half an hour among the bedclothes and pillows.

Rufe Rourke was a miserable-looking object, evidently in considerable awe of Hiram Hawkins, as well as the detective.

"I grabbed the old woman behind first, slipped the handcuffs on her, and then had 'em on Smasher Jim, who seemed to think I didn't amount to anything," laughed the postmaster. "But these handcuffs work with a patent spring, and go on themselves without any trouble. When once I had them on, I made Rufe Rourke hold the darlings here, while I put on the shackles, and then I had 'em both. That's the story. Let us go down-stairs," concluded Hiram, motioning to Rufe to walk in front of him, and leaving the two prisoners alone with as little compunction as if they had been rats.

"I'll get even with you yet!" snarled Smasher Jim, as they went down-stairs.

To release Lucy from the parlor was the work of a moment; then Ralph directed Sam Stokes to go to a police station for two officers. He had made the capture of Smasher Jim, and had taken possession of the den, but he wanted officers to be with him when he searched it, because he did not know what he might find, and he was not disposed to take any more chances.

Rufe Rourke was sitting disconsolately by the side of the piano, waiting to see what the detective would do with him, apparently. He was in deadly terror of Ready Ralph, ascribing to him more than human powers, especially since he had learned that Ralph was in the employ of the Bureau of Secret Service.

The detective felt sure that he had taken all the treachery out of Rufe, and although he could not hope to save him from punish-

ment altogether, he was disposed to say a few extenuating words for him at his inevitable trial.

"I never bear malice," observed Ralph, looking at Rourke, "and I shall take care that your work in behalf of the Government, in assisting Hiram Hawkins to capture James Walker and Mrs. Halket, is given due weight in the proper quarter."

Rufe Rourke was in the middle of profuse thanks for the detective's kindness to him, as he called it, when a slight noise in the hall made Ralph start from his seat and run to the parlor door.

He gave it a pull, but discovered that it was fastened *outside*. At the same moment he felt a stream of cold air come through the broken panels, as he heard the front door open.

"Hurry, Hiram, and help me force this door!" cried the detective, excitedly.

Hiram ran to his assistance, but, as the door opened inward, they had little power over it.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Smasher Jim, outside in the hall. "Thought you had me, eh? Give my regards to the folks in Sangville and Washington when you get back, and tell the Secret Service guys that Smasher Jim is still in his old business."

"Confound you!" yelled Ralph, "you shall not escape me!"

He drew his revolver, as he spoke, and took quick aim at the form of Smasher Jim, who had reached the front door, and was just stepping outside.

There was a loud report, but the bullet went wide of its mark, as the postmaster knocked up the young detective's arm just as he pulled the trigger.

"What made you do that?" demanded Ralph, in a rage. "He's gone for good, now."

"Don't get skeered! We'll catch him. You want to take him alive, don't yer?"

"Dead or alive, I don't care which," answered the young sleuth-hound, hotly.

"Wal, you shall have him, alive! Though I don't see how he got out of them patent handcuffs and shackles!"

When they reached the room they saw that the sheriff's patent handcuffs and shackles did not amount to much after all, for they were broken and smashed in all directions, while a piece of strong wire that lay by the side of them told how Smasher Jim, an expert man in picking locks, had destroyed the springs, and freed himself and Mother Halket with comparatively little trouble.

"Wal, I swan!" exclaimed Hiram, regretfully. "I'll never believe in no patents again."

CHAPTER XIV.

AT LAST!

SAM STOKES scuttled along toward the nearest police-station, but, in the dark, he soon lost his bearings, and, in spite of his old knowledge of the city, he could not find the place of which he was in search.

"Durn this thing! Ralph will think I'm no good," he muttered. "I might ask a cop, if I see one, but I don't want to do that. These Chicago cops are so suspicious, an' he might run me in without giving me no chance to explain."

He was standing in the shadow of a tall house at the corner of two streets near the Clark street bridge, when a woman dashed up against him, and excitedly clung around his neck, while she muttered some unintelligible words into his ear.

"What's the matter with yer? Let go of my neck," spluttered Sam, who was nearly choked by the violence of the hug. "Who are you, anyhow? I don't know yer."

As he spoke, he managed to drag the woman a little away from the building, and turned her face toward a distant electric-light. Then he uttered a long whistle.

It was Mother Halket!

She had not seen the boy in the house, and although she would have recognized him in Sangville, where she had casually noticed him as in the employ of Hiram Hawkins, she did not know him here.

"There are wicked men after me," she whispered, in agitated accents. "Can't you hide me somewhere?"

"Certainly," answered Sam, who had no idea what to do with her, but was determined not to let her out of his grasp, now that he had her, for he had no doubt that Smasher Jim was somewhere in the vicinity.

He saw that the house near which they were standing was an empty warehouse, and that the door had been carelessly left open.

Without hesitation he guided her into this doorway, just as Smasher Jim Walker came up, panting. He had evidently been having a hard run, and was exhausted.

"Jim!" cried Mother Halket, rushing to the door.

He turned and looked in the direction like a hunted animal, and then ran in and closed the door.

"We can stay here for awhile, anyhow, Jim," said Mother Halket, in a low voice.

"Yes. That fellow, the Secret Service detective, is right on our heels. Curse him! I'll get even with him yet. He seems to have the devil's own assistance in getting after me. We'll have to give Chicago the shake now, and try to do some work in the East."

"Look out, Jim! Keep away from the window!"

Smasher Jim drew back, in response to Mother Halket's warning and asked, carelessly:

"Who is this boy? Safe?"

"Oh, yes. He's a stranger. He's all right," answered Mother Halket, in a whisper.

Sam overheard the words, however, and muttered to himself, with a knowing smile:

"You bet he's all right!"

"I'm going to look outside," said Smasher Jim, taking no more notice of Sam Stokes.

"Better not."

"Oh, yes. They did not come up this way. And if they did, what could they do?"

"I don't know. I feel played out," answered Mother Halket.

Jim opened the door, notwithstanding, and, stepping outside—found himself in the grasp of Hiram Hawkins, while Ralph Rapiere held the muzzle of his six-shooter against his forehead, so that the cold steel made a shiver run through the frame of the counterfeiter, in spite of the courage he was accustomed to boast of.

At the same instant, Sam Stokes, who had been carelessly feeling along the wall in the dark, without thinking particularly about what he was doing, came across an electric light button, and turned it.

A blaze of white light illuminated the large room, for the button controlled a dozen good-sized incandescent lamps.

"What's this?" cried Mother Halket, hardly knowing what she said.

"What's this?" repeated Sam Stokes, with his usual grin. "Why, it's all day with you and the gang, and Ready Ralph is on deck again!"

For an instant, the four stood in the positions described, each waiting for some sign from the others.

"Now you've got us in this way, what are you going to do?" demanded the Smasher, contemptuously.

"I am going to make you march this way to the nearest police station, and put you in a cell. Then I will bring you up in the United States District Court, and charge you with counterfeiting and various other crimes against the Government of the United States. That is what I am going to do with you, James Walker, alias Thomas Rocket, alias

Robert Higgins, alias Colonel Fester, alias Smasher Jim," answered Ralph, deliberately.

Smasher Jim winced as Detective Ralph ran over his various aliases in the confident manner of one who was sure of his facts, but he laughed sneeringly, and then, like a flash, a peculiar light came into his eyes as he looked at something or somebody over the shoulder of the detective, and then dropped his gaze.

"He sees Rufe Rourke," thought Ralph. "Well, perhaps he will be fooled in him, too."

It was true. Rufe Rourke had come with Hawkins and Ready Ralph, because it was just as well to have him with them, as to leave him in the house. The detective knew that he would not try to get away, because he had become firmly impressed with the conviction that he could not escape, and it would be better for him to trust to the mercy of the court through the intercession of ready Ralph.

But Smasher Jim did not know this, and that was where he made a mistake.

As soon as Rufe Rourke had come near enough to the detective to touch him, Smasher Jim yelled, sharply, at the top of his voice:

"Look out, Rapiere! Behind you!"

As he uttered these words in a startling shriek, the counterfeiter threw himself upon Ralph!

There was a loud report, as the detective's pistol was discharged, and Smasher Jim's right hand fell useless at his side. The bullet had shattered his wrist.

The Smasher had depended upon Ralph turning around to see what was behind him, involuntarily, at the warning yell, but the scheme did not work.

"Now, Sam," said Ralph, as, with an involuntary cry of pain, Jim Walker took his wounded right hand in his left. "And you, too, Rufe."

Rufe Rourke, seeing what was wanted, seized Mother Halket by the elbow, and drew her toward the detective, she making no resistance, and seeming, indeed, to feel that it would be more healthy for her to yield quietly, now that she was caught.

With a dexterous movement, Ralph, who had taken something out of a pocket without being observed, slipped a handcuff upon Smasher Jim's left hand, and another upon Mother Halket's right, with a click that told how strong the springs were.

"There, Smasher; that's not a patent handcuff, but I don't think you will get it off till I give you permission."

"Curse you!" howled the ex-convict, in his rage. "I wish I had you to myself in a room for two minutes. I'd teach you a lesson."

"Well, if you had me in a room, I think you would find me on deck. But, never mind about that. March!"

"Where to?" asked Sam Stokes.

"To the police-station you could not find," laughed Ralph.

"I'll show yez the way, be gobl!" put in Rufe Rourke.

"Been there before, eh, Rufe?"

Rufe Rourke only smiled in a sickly way, and the procession moved off, with three pistols covering Smasher Jim and Mother Halket.

Inspector John Gripp sat in his private office in Washington, with an open letter before him, which he was reading half aloud to himself:

"James Walker, alias Smasher Jim, has had his preliminary hearing, and the grand jury have his case. His conviction is certain. The particulars of his capture you have already, in previous letters. Think I have made a good capture, and broken up one of the most dangerous gangs in the West. There are members of it that I may take later on, but the two principals, Walker and

Mother Halket—a most dangerous woman—kept them so thoroughly under control that they cannot do much harm without their leaders. The man Rufe Rourke has never been engaged in any serious work, so far as the evidence shows, and I would suggest that he be allowed to turn United States' evidence. In fact, I have promised him that I will work it for him. The bogus money, stamps, dies, crucibles and bullion found on the premises is in the possession of the court here, and will be shipped to Washington after the trial. Respectfully,

RALPH RAPIERE."

The inspector smiled in a satisfied way, and then the smile became broader as he read a small postscript marked "Personal:"

"I should like to be allowed a month's leave. I want to stay with some friends of mine in Sangville, Indiana. The fact is, I have become engaged to a very nice young lady, daughter of the Hiram Hawkins the postmaster, whose assistance in this capture has been very valuable. I am invited to stay at their home for a month, and I should like rest. At the end of that time, court will be in session, and I shall have to be on hand to testify against the Smasher and his slippery gang. By the way, there is a young fellow in the employ of Hiram Hawkins who would be useful in the bureau, if you could find room for him. I told him I would write to you about him. His name is Samuel Stokes. R. R."

Inspector Gripp put the letter down, and actually laughed out loud. He had a tender heart, had Inspector Gripp, and he did not forget his own love-making days.

"Of course he shall have the leave, and I'll do what I can for this boy Stokes. As for the girl, I do not believe she could find a better husband than Ralph Rapiere, one of Uncle Sam's most efficient detectives. "I hope the force won't lose his services by reason of this new partnership!"

And the excellent Gripp gave the young special his "God speed!" in good wishes.

THE END.

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